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IN SPACIOUS TIMES

BY

JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

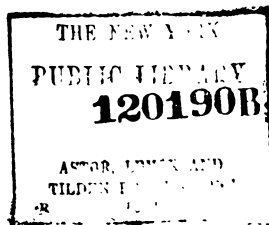
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IN SPACIOUS TIMES

CHAPTER I

THE WEST COUNTRY

WHEN Elizabeth of England was an old queen a man came into the West Country by the best way, which is the way of the sea. His name was Hercules Flood and he came in a ship of his own whose name was *The Golden Hart*. Her timbers had strained in the storms of a hundred waters and stood the strain to the honour of oak of England. In a sense it might be said of this ship, as of the vessel in the nursery rhyme, that its sails were made of satin and that its masts were made of gold, for though in all sobriety of fact the sails were so many squares of patched and weather-tumbled cloth and the mast no other than translations of trees, they were of as much value to their master as if they had indeed been fashioned of the more magnificent materials. For it was thanks to them and their sturdiness and their holding together and rebuffing the winds and waves that a very considerable quantity of the precious metals and other commodities even more precious garnered in the hot of the tropics and the cold of the north were being cargoed into the West Country as the property of the owner of the ship.

Hard by the bow of the vessel two men leaned side by side upon the bulwarks and gazed at the nearing land. He that was closer to the shore was Master Hercules Flood, a tall fellow, comfortably over six feet, although a careless observer might have guessed him at less because of the bigness of his body. He was, indeed, largely made, but nature had so compactly handled him, had adjusted all parts of him with so admirable a symmetry, binding bone and

flesh and muscle and sinew together with so firm a touch, that he carried his bulk with the ease and grace of the slenderest, and rendered to the spectator no full account of the strength that was stored in his frame. For his years he was, as far as he himself could tell it, but newly turned of thirty. He had candid blue-grey eyes with that sea-look in them which almost always distinguishes the mariner from the landsman. His crisp hair and beard gave a russet-coloured frame to a face which, like the rest of the man, did not at once declare all that it signified.

He had crammed so much of the pith of existence into the formal numeration of his calendar; he had voyaged so much and warred so much; had wrestled with the elements so much and run down and up so many rungs of the ladder of fortune that the multitude of his experiences had marked themselves upon his face. It was as if the incessant pounding and battering of the fists of adventure upon his countenance had bruised it into a kind of odd smoothness, like the visage of a figure-head that stares at spray or sun with the same composure. Any one would take the man at the first glance for a sailor, just one sailor with another, one unit of the hundreds of English sailors that used the sea and were heroes and pirates unawares, as it were. It would need a second glance, or perhaps a third, and each a keen one, to discern that the man shielded no workaday character with that seeming calmness and uniformity of cheeks and chin and forehead.

His companion made him a curious contrast and foil, for he was short even to squatness, yet was so largely shaped as to seem almost as broad as he was long. He was plainly a Celt and his Welsh blood showed itself in his darkness of favour. Ink-black hair and beard emphasised the swarthiness of his skin and the angry darkness of his eyes. His great neck and throat, tanned to the blackness of a jack, seemed as massive as a bull's and flagrantly proclaimed the force and vigour of their owner, a force and vigour again asserted by the huge hands, as hairy as a bear's paws, which now rested on the rail and held his elbows. Even a shrewd judge of humanity, surveying the two men, would have declared that this dusky fellow was the mightier man of the pair. Yet such a shrewd observer would have erred.

"You seem," said the small man to the large man, "glad to be coming into port."

He spoke with a certain vexation in his voice, as if it irritated him in his attitude towards the world to find any one pleased at anything.

"I am glad to be coming home," said Hercules simply. "I am glad to be coming to the West Country."

"The West Country," echoed the small man with a disdainful snort, which seemed to suggest that one country was much the same as another when you came to think of it.

"Aye, the West Country, Griffith," repeated Hercules tenderly. "I have loved the West Country ever since I can remember. I loved her when I was poor and I love her now when I am, in a manner of speaking, rich."

"In a manner of speaking," said the small man captiously. "You know very well that you have made your fortune."

"I have made my fortune and lost my fortune once and again before this," said Flood. "But this time I am going to satisfy my heart's desire."

"I didn't know that you had a heart's desire beyond seafaring," said Griffith.

"It has lain snug in my heart for many a long day," said Hercules, "to build me a house in the West Country."

"There is no house like a ship," said the small man, with an air of dogged pugnacity.

There was a twinkle in the big man's eyes. "I'll not say that you are wrong there," he admitted, and laughed as he made the admission. "But we shall see what we shall see."

"It will take some time to build you a house," said Griffith.

"I expect it is built already," answered the other gaily. "It is much more than a year ago since I wrote from Porto Rico to one that I can trust in Plymouth, telling him my mind as to the kind of house I wanted building and bidding him set about the business at once. So I should not be surprised to find a roof ready for my head as soon as I set feet on dry land again."

"You are a provident fellow," said the little man, looking up at him with a blink of admiration. "And yet a reckless, for it is an unchancy matter to set a house a-building when you are using the great seas."

"I have taken more chances than one," replied the other

with a laugh. "I tell you I have made all snug for my home-coming, as you shall learn very speedily. The making of money is a poor trade in itself, but it is a bonny business when it enables him that makes it to live like a king in Devon."

The Welshman looked at him in some perplexity and ran a dusky hand through his tangle of black hair.

"What makes you so mortal fond of Devon?" he asked, in a querulous voice.

The big man pointed to the scene before him.

"There is your answer. Doesn't your heart drum with delight at the beauty of it? Was ever sea or sky so blue, were ever hills so green and gay? Was there ever a town like yonder town? I could kiss my hand to every chimney that whisks its feather of smoke in the air."

"You talk like a poet," said the small man in decided condemnation. The other drew a long breath of satisfaction.

"Taste me that clean air," he commanded. "It smacks deliciously of the salt of the seas and the clover of the fields and the roses blowing about a porch. Also it smacks of West Country cream and West Country beef and West Country beer. Oh, but I am blithe to be so nigh to port."

The small man looked up into his beaming face with a quizzical expression compounded of amazement and amusement. They were so near by this time that they could see the white bulkheads on the quays, and the coils of rope, and the sailors swaying up and down smoking their pipes, and the townspeople going about their business and the dogs of the town going about theirs, which was, as it seemed, to smell as many smells and to chase or be chased by as many other dogs as possible.

"I wonder if you will like home-biding as well as you expect," the smaller man reflected.

"Who knows?" responded the other, "I do not dream dreams in day-time or pamper my fancy with false pictures. If I remember the pleasures and the merits of the West Country I remember them frankly as they were and not as affection might have them be."

"Well," commented Griffith, "you are well built for the pleasures of life, I will say that for you."

"I have, I thank Heaven," the big man admitted, "a

sound stomach, a sharp appetite and a hard head. I like my meals without greed, I hope, and enjoy them without gluttony as a West Countryman should."

"You and your West Country," said the smaller man, with a decided sniff.

"I have tasted the fare of many nations," retorted the big man, "and I always maintain that English fare, taking it by and large, is the finest eating an honest man could desire, and that out of such variety of feeding as English fare can offer the West Country spreads the finest table."

"There is nothing like making the best of things," said the other.

"That is a very true saying," returned the big man, "and would be truer still if I had the misfortune to be born a Welshman."

The little man glowered at him for a moment, and gave an angry cough. Then he laughed good-humouredly.

"Were you born in Plymouth?" he questioned.

"I believe so," answered the other. "At least I know that Plymouth is the earliest thing I can remember. It seems a long time ago since I first learned the name of the place where I lived. But every time I return to Plymouth I unroll the map of my boyhood and have a look at it. I dwelt in a little cottage overlooking the sea——" He broke off suddenly with a laugh. "But there, why should I weary you with my memories."

"In all the time that we have been together," said Griffith, "you have told me nothing or little about yourself. I am no more inquisitive than another, but I should like to know what went to the making of you if you have a mind to tell the tale."

"Good Lord," said Hercules, "my childhood was neither strange nor secret. Such as it was it is quite at your service. I lived with a woman who was not my mother, for she was unwedded and a maid, and she kept house for her brother who was unwedded and a bachelor. Yet I was named by their name, so I must have been of their kin, and I know that I always took them to be my uncle and my aunt and I always called them so."

"Were you fond of them?" asked the small man. The big man nodded.

"They were very kind to me, especially the woman. The man had a ship of his own and long ventures took him much from home. He always seemed very wonderful to me, with his fur cap and his red face and the thick gold rings in his ears. But he seemed most wonderful on the day when he clapped a hand upon my shoulder and asked me how I would like to go for a sailor."

"That was an easy question to answer, no doubt," the Welshman commented.

"Very surely. The salt of the water was ever on my lips, and my heart drummed to follow the sea."

He was silent again, scanning the growing town under a lifted hand, for the sunlight was strong. He seemed to think that he had said all that there was need to say. But his companion was not of his mind.

"Well," he pressed, "and what were your fortunes when you followed the sea?"

The other gave a light laugh, as of one that was suddenly recalled to facts from day-dreams.

"The usual fortunes of a sailor-man. Wide waters and strange lands where life seemed more brightly coloured than at home. Lord, but it was a good life, and a wholesome. I was always strong, which was why they gave me my outlandish name I take it, and the sea made me stronger and stronger."

"You are a strong man," the other agreed, with something like a frown puckering his swarthy forehead. Only for a moment, however; then it vanished again as he went on. "That is why you and I are friends. I always vowed that if ever I could find a stronger man than myself I would share my life with him. But I never did until I encountered you at Valparaiso and you overcame me."

Hercules laughed.

"You are a grand man, Griffith, and I am proud to have you for a friend, prouder than of any friendship I ever made, save one only."

"And what might that be?" Griffith questioned, a little jealously.

"My friendship with Francis Drake," Hercules answered with a great pride in his voice. "Simple as I stand here I

helped him to singe the King of Spain's beard and I served under him when he shattered the Armada."

"You have lived a fine life," said the smaller man meditatively. "You have tasted adventure."

"I have eaten large and drunk deep of adventure," replied the big man. "I hope I have not had my last bite and sup of it."

"Why should that be, in Heaven's name?" asked the other in some surprise. Flood shrugged his shoulders.

"The world is growing quieter," he said. "More's the pity. And here am I that have it in my mind to settle down and take my ease. I trust I shall not become lumpish and lethargic with eating well and drinking smooth and sleeping soft. But I fear I have come to the tether of my adventures."

"No man can be sure of that," said Griffith thoughtfully. "Maybe you will find adventure lives on land as well as on sea. And it may come into your mind to marry. Man, there will be an adventure for you."

"One that I have little mind for at this present," said Hercules. "I am no amorist, lad. Ever since I used the sea I have been too busy to think love-thoughts. I have known men profess passion for this nymph or that nymph, and spout verses sweet and curious and cloying on the theme. But I am not of their mind."

The other looked at him sharply from under his black shaggy eyebrows.

"Have you never loved a lass in all your days?" he asked with surprise in his voice.

"As to that," the other replied composedly, "I had a touch of calf-love when I was a lad, and I have kissed a wench here and there in foreign parts for diversion, being a human creature and curious. But it sticks in my mind that my amorous friends and their poets are pleased to make a great deal out of a very little, much as if a fellow at the end of a pleasant feast should carry himself as if he had helped to bring Heaven and Earth together."

"There you talk very sensible," said Griffith daffingly. "Take care that you do not see some lass on shore that will make you sing to another tune, aye, and dance too, for that matter."

Hercules surveyed his swarthy companion with a smile and shook his head.

"Have no fear of that, man," he assured. "My time is past for sudden fancies. When a man overtops the age of thirty he realises that one woman is much like another."

The Welshman hunched his huge shoulders.

"Aye, aye," he grunted, "it is well to view women with indifference."

"With indifference, if you will," said Hercules, "but an indifference that has no stain of disdain on it. Who could dare to disdain women who has been taught from his boyhood that a woman named Elizabeth was the greatest she in existence and that the pride of dying for her was only to be rivalled by the pride of living for her."

"It is the law of an Englishman's life," said the Welshman, "that his first duty after his duty to God is to love Elizabeth and his second duty is to hate the Spaniard."

"And a very good law, too," applauded the other heartily. There was a short silence; then Griffith spoke again.

"Have you ever seen the Queen?" he questioned.

The other answered very gravely.

"Oh, aye, I have seen her. After the Armada, Captain Drake took me with a bunch of his sailor-men to Court, to be thanked by the great Queen whose dominion he had helped to save."

He said no more, but his companion expected more and sought for it.

"Was she goodly to look upon?" he asked.

"I was a raw young man," said the big man, "humming with victory. I came prepared for enchantment and I was not enchanted. It is perhaps a misfortune for me that I always see things as they are, and queens make no exceptions."

"What was she like?" Griffith persisted.

"Why," said the other, "from the way folk talked and rhymed of her, I had grown to expect a divinity, and it came as a shock to find a faded ancient painted woman, who minced and giggled like a ninny though her face was lined like a map."

"What then," asked Griffith, "is all this talk of great lords that perish for love of her?"

"Heaven forgive them," said the other, "they do but make fools of themselves and of her. Love is a silly business at the best, but such false antic folly makes me sick."

Griffith grunted agreement. There was a patch of silence. Then the Welshman again questioned Hercules.

"Are those folk of yours still living?"

Hercules shook his head.

"My uncle fell by an Indian arrow at Nombre de Dios, and as for my aunt I never saw her again after my earliest voyages for she went away inland to live with some kinsfolk, it being lonely for her then in Plymouth, and as I have not heard from her for this many a long year, I suppose that she is no more. But here we are coming to anchor and there is the pinnacle. When all is trim on the ship come ashore in your turn. You will find me at the 'Dolphin.'"

"Whereabouts is the 'Dolphin'?" asked the other. The big man extended an indicating hand.

"It lies yonder, to the left of those tall houses. If you follow the Hoe you will fall over it, but any seaman or landsman either will tell you the way. It is a good inn, I promise you."

He was over the side as he finished speaking and dropped into the pinnacle where a sailor awaited him with a pair of oars. He waved his hand to the black man above him, and the little boat darted across the smooth water.

CHAPTER II

THE QUEEN'S LADIES

THE Queen was occupied very much as her sister sovereign is occupied in the old song. She was "sitting in her parlour"; that is she was in her own private chamber in her palace of St. James. She was in the company of certain of her maids of honour, and though she was not exactly "eating bread and honey," she was doing very much the same thing. She and her maids, having made their midday meal, were regaling themselves with a treat in the tasting of a certain preserve of guava which had been metaphorically laid at the Queen's feet by one of her sea-captains on his return from the Indies; and was now being practically lifted to the Queen's lips on its way to the Queen's interior. If the great Queen ever admitted herself to have any weakness, it was a weakness for sweetmeats, and this new conserve flattered her palate. As she rolled a spoonful on her tongue she rolled her hot brown eyes in an ecstasy of satisfaction.

When the morsel, dwindling, slipped in sweetness to the depths, her Majesty, turning to her ring of observant and expectant companions with a contortion of countenance that clearly resembled a wink, gave them permission to follow her example and fall to. Instantly four pretty ladies plunged four pretty silver spoons into the red substance and conveyed four portions of sticky deliciousness to their pretty lips.

The captain-jewel of that ring of youthful faces was the face of the Queen, the face which was not youthful but which still pretended to youth. Her Majesty was habited with an extravagance of splendid juvenility, and to the magnificent pyramid of pearled and jewelled silk the apex was the ancient face. The red hair was still a flame, for its venerable grey was hidden under false locks that had

even more than its former colour. The cheeks and lips were slobbered with a bounty of white and red which only served to emphasize the roughness and yellowness of the skin wherever it was visible. The dark eyes that had outwatched such a world of players and read the secrets of such a quantity of hearts were bleared and jaundiced now, though they could still stare from under their puffed and puckered eyelids with a terrifying malice and acumen. Though she seemed as if she might at any moment fall into a ruin of decay she still aped the graces and aired the affectations of a girl; she simpered and grinned and grimaced and allowed herself to liberate great volleys of crackling laughter on the least provocation, after a fashion that froze the blood of her companions. There was not a human being at Court who did not shiver inwardly at the grisly effigy that was once a great Queen: not a human being, except the great Queen, who did not regard it as the most awesome comment on the eternal vanity of vanities.

It was said of the Queen that she drew vitality from the beings of the girls she gathered about her; that in some super-physical manner she sucked the juices of their youth and their good-humour and their high spirits and transfused some measure of these elements of health and strength into her chilling blood and waning tissues.

It was said of the girls who were chosen to be the Queen's companions—and they were chosen and changed very frequently—that they were consciously or unconsciously aware of the draining influence that the society of their royal mistress implied. It was certain that while the Queen always gained and brightened after those hours spent with her women, the women came from them fagged and weary, with flagging pulses, heavy heads and an aching sense of exhaustion. Yet if the Queen had been scientifically conscious of the vigour she drew from the fellowship of her women, and had plainly told them of what they gave and what she took, they would have made their sacrifice cheerfully. For was she not the great Queen?

The Great Queen!

The Lady of the long reign that had held so much glory and not a little shame; the woman who had been so bold

and so cunning, so noble and so cruel, so wise and so unwise, so dignified and so ridiculous; the Queen who had fooled princes and defied kings, who had measured the strength of her little island against the Empire that had aimed at world dominion and had broken that Empire's strength; the Queen who had killed a sister sovereign; who had used the greatest and the wisest of her people as the tools of her unscrupulousness, but who had, above all and before all, helped to make England a great power in the world. If her tortuous mind could spin intrigue as nimbly as any super-subtle Italian there was a straight streak in it which enabled her to choose great men and to use them greatly for the greatness of the State. Truly this weird old woman had a strange and splendid store of memories to feed upon when she asked for such food.

But it was believed that she concerned herself very little with things done; that it was ever with the present that her thoughts were busy—the present that was gliding and sliding with such remorseless swiftness into the past and taking with it in every hour some of that beauty which she still believed she carried, and of that youth which she still professed perennial.

Who were the four fair ladies that kept the great Queen company? They were for the moment the Queen's most intimate friends, the little knot of ladies that were known in the vocabulary of the Court as "the Queen's sisters." It being one of her Majesty's chiefest whims to affect an eternal juvenility it pleased her always to select from among her maids of honour the youngest and the prettiest and the wittiest, and to make of them a kind of private society. With them it was her pleasure to spend a private hour every day, when it was clearly understood that they were all girls together, and were to chatter unrestrainedly to one another to their hearts' content of clothes and lovers and nonsense as youth and giddiness will.

And of all the little company who was younger and who was giddier than the Queen herself? Who so artless, who so jolly, who so petting, appealing, spoiled and spoiling as she? But these play-times were a tedious and a fearful joy to her companions who felt like so many lambs with a tiger-cat.

"Tell me, sisterkins," said the Queen, clapping her thin hands together so that the rings with which they were encrusted rattled and clattered, "what shall we play at now? Shall it be cards or dominoes, chess or chequers? Oh, we have played all these to extinction. Why, in the name of God, can no fool be found sane enough to invent a new game that is worth the playing?"

As she spoke her fierce eyes seemed to film over, shutting her in a reverie apart from her surroundings and the moving world. In God's name she had played many and many a game, and the tragedy of her life of hazard was that there seemed no new game to play, or time to play it if such game there were. Suddenly her eyes unfilmed again and gazed upon the group of her women with unwinking brightness.

"Come, Margaret Bellingham," she commanded, "what have you to say for yourself in this difficulty? I wish to amuse you, sisterkins, but it is for you to decide how you wish to be amused."

Margaret Bellingham mooned at the Queen in her red and white comeliness and suggested forfeits in a fat voice. Peggy Bellingham was always a stupid girl. The Queen snapped at her.

"By God, Peg," she growled, "you have as many ideas as a broody hen. What can you propose, Jennifer?"

This was to Jennifer Chisholm, a crisp brown little woman with a Frenchified face and a voice and manner that lacked the English calm. She was born of a French mother, which accounted for much if it did not explain everything.

"Indeed, your Majesty," said Jennifer, grinning all over her dark face, "I think we should do well to fetch in some of the gentlemen of the Court and make cock-shies of them. They are wooden enough for the sport."

The red eyebrows of the Queen elevated themselves into an arch of disapproval.

"Jennifer, my sister," she said, "we have, I hope, no need of men to entertain us in these happy congresses of ours. Men are all very well in their way, and Heaven forbid that my father's daughter should voice a word or shape a thought against them, but I like to believe that

when a bunch of young women huddle together they can make out to amuse themselves without any need of doublet and hose."

A watchful observer might have gathered from the countenances of the young women that they were in no great completeness of accord with their revered sovereign in this particular. But as far as any outward manifestation of their emotions went it implied cordial agreement.

The Queen now turned to the third of her temporary sisterhood, turned to Barbara Leigh. The Queen had a special tenderness for Barbara because she had red hair like herself, and boasted such a whiteness of skin as the Queen was once able to boast. But beyond this complicity of hair and complexion there was little in common between the greatest princess of the earth and the honest girl from Essex, who was not even hot-tempered, as it is the duty of all self-respecting red-haired people to be.

"With your Majesty's good leave," she said, in her jolly, straightforward way, "if it were ask and have with me, I should be all for the free air and a game of romps in the garden."

Now this proposition was not in itself displeasing to the Queen, and indeed Barbara Leigh knew that it would not be, for her Majesty, in spite of her three-score and odd years, still regarded herself as free to jump and skip and jig with the briskest. But just at that moment the gaunt old idol was not of a mind for liveliness.

"You are a fool, Babs," she protested with a shrill petulance. "We maids"—and here she vouchsafed a gruesome simper—"should not always be of a skittish disposition, or yearning to cut capers. Here are we all housed and snug and homeful, as sisterkins should be, and it need not tax our wit too gravely to find wholesome entertainment. Come, Clarendra, what have you to say in this matter?"

She whom the Queen now addressed was the fourth and the youngest and the latest arrival at Court of the Queen's newest group of sisterkins. Also she was, without a moment's hesitation of question, by far the most beautiful. Her face was such an one as some great Italian painter might have shown if he could have forgotten for a little that he was Italian, and accepted the possibility of another

ideal. For if the girl's face had the Italian symmetry and balance it did not fly the characteristic Italian colours. Her carnation was clearer than that of the children of the South; her eyes displayed a brighter blue. Her hair was dark indeed, but it was not of your changeless sable; it was of a warm darkness that had hints of red in it and glints of gold, so that now you swore it was ebony and now you swore it was chestnut.

Clarenda Constant was poor, though from the point of view of a herald she had the best blood of the four girls. Unquestionably she was the most beautiful; there were those who asserted that not less questionably she was the most foolish.

It could scarcely be denied that her nature had not gained by the Queen's favour. Edged into the Court with great difficulty and much paring of the family cheese, she took the fancy of the Queen at her first appearance and was admitted into the latest sisterhood, to the abiding envy of such ladies as were shed from that charmed company. She was adored to a point by all the men, but not, unhappily, to the point of marriage. She was landless, she was dowerless, and in the world of self-seekers, adventurers and climbers which was called the Court, honest poverty, however handsome, did not seem to make the desirable wife, however desirable it might very well be in some other capacity. But so long as Clarenda Constant was pampered and flattered and praised, and had men around her professing themselves her slaves, she was content to enjoy the present and let to-morrow take care of itself.

It was suspected by the shrewd that her Majesty did not altogether cherish Mistress Clarenda Constant. It was a point in her Majesty's practice always to make a great show of favour to pretty girls that came into her service, but it generally came to pass that if they garnered too many glances from the volatility of man, their stay in the Court aviary was but as that of a bird of passage, hurrying from shore to shore. Sometimes they were either hustled and bundled into a snug and comfortable marriage which whisked them away to the delights of child-bearing in some fairly distant manor house or country seat. Sometimes her Maj-

esty had occasion, after a steady course of fault-finding, suddenly to insist that they had offended once too often, and so the delinquent was hurried back into whatever corner of whatever province she came from, there to make the best of her exile and marry or not as fortune willed. In short, it came to this, that though her Majesty was daily circled by a bevy of pretty damsels, the stay of these stars in the orbit of the Court was habitually brief, and the abiding planets amongst the maids of honour were generally a little long in the tooth and yellow in the cheek and something gaunt and angular in the figure.

Those that were well versed in the astronomy of the Court saw the fortune of Clarendon Constant under no favourable aspect. The Queen protested that she was entranced by the child's beauty, but she made the protestations with strained lips and squinted eyes. Indeed there was no questioning Clarendon's beauty. All the men of the Court were mad about her, gallants, rascallions, springalds, all, they toasted her charms, voted her incomparable, danced attendance on her whenever she was free for such measures, and played day-long and night-long at the game of catching her eye. Little of which antickings helped to endear the young lady to her sovereign mistress, although as yet her sovereign mistress showed no sign of anything other than the blindest affability. It was one of the contrasting torments of the Queen's nature that she loved to be surrounded by the young and the comely, but that, at the same time, she could not endure to witness these fair ones obtaining without question those amorous glances that were only surrendered to the divine Gloriana by a violent effort of will.

In the case of Clarendon Constant the Queen had the additional reason for irritation that she had done the girl a kindness out of a sense of gratitude. There are few senses monarchs less relish than an appeal to the sense of gratitude, but the appeal that was made on behalf of Clarendon Constant was scarcely one to be resisted with credit or even with decency. For in the days when the powerful Queen was a powerless princess with a head whose alliance with its shoulders depended entirely upon the whim of an exceedingly unscrupulous kinswoman, and

when to assert oneself as a friend of the princess was to mark oneself out for very present danger, the chief of the impoverished house of Constant was as unfaltering and unafraid in his adherence to the party of the princess as if he had been surnamed from his nature, or had moulded his nature upon his surname. There were times when the members of Elizabeth's party could be counted with comfort on the fingers and thumb of a single glove, but in all such enumerations the name of this Constant was to be found of the catalogue. At a period when a change of inclination would have meant honour and fortune this Constant adhered to his poor princess just because he loved her and believed in her, without thought, and indeed as it then seemed without hope, of reward.

It would not therefore have been humanly possible for a great Queen to deny the desire of the widow of such a loyal follower. If the Constants, in their poverty, besought for their daughter Clarendra the outward state and the meagre emoluments of one of the Queen's women, it would have been the top of ingratitude to refuse the favour. And the Queen did not wish to seem ungrateful to those that had served her in the past, because she always wished to range around her, inspired by those examples, men and women to serve her in the present, who should in their turn serve as examples to, and encouragers to, those that should serve her in the future. For it was part of the Queen's policy to act as if she and her reign were fated to endure for ever.

Clarendra Constant hesitated a little before replying to her royal mistress. She was not of a hesitating disposition, nor was hers a faltering tongue, but there were few indeed whose composure carried them triumphantly out of the range of that wrinkled face, so seamed and scarred with history, out of the fire of those tameless, questioning, unmerciful eyes. But she had to speak and she spoke and her voice was as delightful as her face and her hair and her eyes and her lips and all the rest of her.

"With your Majesty's good leave," she said, "I am of opinion that there is no better entertainment in the world than to play off a joke upon some complaisant, unsuspecting innocent. To make a man think he is a king, for instance,

when he is no such matter, or to befool him in love, and to make him do as one pleased. For to do as one pleases is surely the best thing in the world."

The Queen looked with a puzzled frown upon Clarendo. She did not deny that the girl's suggestion had its merits, but she could not see how it was with convenience and swiftness to be applied. So she adroitly shifted to the girl's comment.

"Tell me, minion," she questioned, "what you would do if some fairy came down the chimney and proffered you the familiar three wishes. How would you voice your heart's desires?"

"Why," cried the girl, "in the first place I should wish to be always young and always beautiful." She paused a little and then hurriedly corrected the last word to "comely."

A shade passed over the face of Elizabeth, haggard beneath its mask of paint.

"That is a thing which is difficult, even for great Queens," she said sadly. Suddenly she spoke more sharply. "I was not thinking of miracles, mistress, I was thinking of things possible."

Clarendo allowed herself very little time for reflection.

"Why, I should wish," she said glibly, "that I had unlimited money to spend, and that I was always free to do exactly as I liked."

The Queen frowned a little at these aspirations.

"You are a worldly baggage," she protested, "and it is perhaps as well for you that no fairy godmother is likely to come whisking into the chamber."

Clarendo gave a little sigh and would have spoken, but at this moment the symposium of ladies was interrupted.

CHAPTER III

PHILEMON

WHEN Hercules skipped from his pinnacle to the quay and looked about him he found it hard to realise that he had been so long away from home. It was many a good year since he had last sailed from Plymouth, and yet the place did not seem changed in any way. So far as he could judge from a general glance there was not a new building in the town. He might be just about to set forth upon some feat of navigation instead of returning from the ends of the earth. Almost immediately after he landed he met a man whom he knew well, a fellow mariner, who greeted him with a cheery nod and a flick of the fingers, as if he had parted from him but yesterday in the parlour of the "Dolphin" instead of having never clapped eyes upon him for a long term of time. Flood knew well enough that it was usual for Englishmen like himself to range on the surface of the great deep, to explore undreamed-of countries and to come home as carelessly as if they had lounged into the next street. Therefore he felt almost angry with himself for experiencing any surprise at the matter of fact in his reception by his old acquaintance. Yet he had to admit that he did feel some surprise and that he wished it was a little more wonderful for a man to return, as he had returned, from the further rims of ocean to his own land.

After Hercules, thus thinking, had walked a certain way along the sea front he turned to the right into a sloping side street and halted before a house a little way up. It was an ancient house with a handsomely carved doorway in an Italianate design of flowers and fruit; its timbers were dark with age; and the casement of its first floor projected over the street. In this casement, through the

open window, Hercules could see the figure of a man seated at a table. His back was to the returned traveller, but Hercules recognised the back and the man with a smile. Pushing the old oak door which stood ajar he entered the passage of the house and ascended softly by a flight of stairs to the first floor. Here he laid his hand softly upon the latch of a door and lifting it cautiously entered the room and stood there for some seconds, surveying the man at the table without the man at the table being at all aware of his presence.

The seated figure was a man of about Hercules' own age, but of a very different standard of humanity. He was slight and lean even to frailness and the fine oval of his face was pale with the pallor of delicacy and marked with an unyouthful gravity of ascetic lines and of lines that were very sensual. He was soberly habited in a sad-coloured suit, which was brightly enlivened by cherry-tinted ribbons, and he was busily employed in working with a quill upon a sheet of paper.

Hercules whistled the start of a tune and the sound swung the draughtsman round with a stare. What he saw made him spring from his seat and rush forward with both hands held out.

"Hercules!"

"Philemon!"

The men's hands met in the friendliest grip; the men's eyes scanned each other's face with illumination of joy.

"When did you come up from the sea?" asked the man whom Hercules had called Philemon.

"'Tis little more than an hour since we sighted Plymouth," Hercules answered, "and the moment my toes touched England they turned to your threshold."

"Always kind and always friend," said Philemon gravely. His gravity was a curious blend of sweetness and melancholy which would puzzle a stranger. Hercules smiled.

"Maybe selfishness spurred my friendship and my speed," he said. "What was your worship so busy upon when I came in just now, that you did not hearken to a sailor's tread?"

He moved towards the table as he spoke with Philemon by his side. A faint red flushed in Philemon's cheeks.

"It was but idle work," he protested, "and unworthy of your attention."

He made as if to push the paper from the table, but the brown hand of Hercules was quicker than the white hand of Philemon and had picked it up. It was the pen picture of the head of a girl, showing the face in profile. Though roughly sketched it was done with a skill that would have made an expert wish it were greater and wonder why it was not greater. Hercules, who was no such matter, scanned the portrait curiously.

"It is a pretty face," he said carelessly. "Is it a fancy sketch?"

"It is more than a pretty face," Philemon insisted warmly. "It is a very beautiful face."

Hercules turned his curiosity from the picture to the face of his friend, and noted its unwonted red.

"You may call it in a sense a portrait," Philemon answered with some embarrassment in his voice, in reply to the question in his friend's glance. "It is a delineation from memory and most unworthy of its original."

Hercules glanced back to the paper that he still held in his hand. He saw with appreciation the mutinous beauty that the cunning of Philemon's touch had rendered patent.

"She is comely," he admitted, a thought less carelessly than before. "Who is the damsel?"

Philemon shook his head.

"I cannot tell you. I know nothing of her save that I believe that she is staying on a visit at King's Welcome."

"Then," questioned Hercules, fluttering the paper in his hand till the lines traced by Philemon seemed to tremble into life, "how this?"

The unfamiliar colour deepened a little on the draughtsman's face. "I encountered her on the downs the other day," he said. "I was riding there, as is my custom, when she galloped by me. I had but a passing glimpse of her, and that foolish toy you play with is no more than my memory of the glimpse."

Hercules laid the paper down.

"A pleasant memory, pleasantly presented," he said. "And now shall we humour a little that selfishness I

talked of. Have you not something to show me that is better like to please than a girl's face?"

Philemon nodded. He opened a drawer in the table he had been working on and took therefrom two small rolls neatly tied with silk cord. As he did so he picked the portrait from the table and put it into the drawer, which he closed.

"Here is *The Golden Hart*," he said, and he handed one of the rolls to his visitor. Hercules undid the silk, unfolded the paper, holding it flat upon the table, and surveyed its presentment, while Philemon peeped at it over his elbow.

The subject represented was certainly curious enough. At first a spectator would have taken it for a skilfully coloured presentation of a sturdy ship, without rigging or sails, and with no more than a short column of wood where the mainmast should be. But in another second he would realise that this vessel neither rode the seas nor lay at ease in harbour or dock, but that she stood bedded, as it were, on a stately and spacious lawn, and was neighboured by gay spaces of garden and orchard and backed in the distance by a fringe of companionable trees. It was very skilfully done, and in a corner ran the inscription in a fine Italian hand of write: "Philemon Minster fecit." The uninformed beholder would probably take the picture for some allegory or emblem such as the time admired.

Hercules Flood looked at the picture with an air of great approval. He drew a deep breath of satisfaction, smiled a delighted smile and turned towards the somewhat anxious countenance of Philemon a face beaming with approval.

"By the burnt beard of Philip," he cried. "You have done better than I dared to hope with all my trust in you. Never was better promise made of a landship yet. There it lies, much as I have seen it in my dreams. Will it be long, I pray you, before I behold it in reality?"

Philemon Minster smiled the gratified smile of the flattered artist.

"You may see it no later than this blessed day if you will," he replied, "for the last plank was fitted and the last nail driven home three days ago."

Hercules, abandoning his picture for the moment, swung round from the table and clasped his friend in his arms.

"God bless you, Philemon Minster," he cried, "for a true friend to a man that hatches a mad fancy under his cap."

"It certainly was a whimsical ambition," said Philemon when he had recovered some volume of the breath that his friend's hug had squeezed out of him, "to build yourself a house that should be like unto a ship as much as a dwelling that is set upon the relatively stable land can resemble one that is set upon the shifting waters. But it appealed to my fancy, that is I fear me too lively and responsive to the idleness and wantonness of vanity."

Philemon sighed heavily, and Hercules gave him a joyous push with his forefinger that sent him sliding across the floor.

"Fie on your hard names," Hercules protested. "There is no vanity nor wantonness in my whim. On the contrary it is a sane and sound venture. For a seafaring man cannot hope to fare upon the sea for ever nor yet might he wish to do so, and yet to a seafaring man there is no comfort such as is afforded by the sides and bulwarks of a ship. So, as I say, a retired mariner, when his strength for the usage of the sea is spent, may, if he lives in a house that is shaped like a ship, still feel, as he walks easy of days and lies snug of nights that he is, in a measure, living the wide life."

"I wonder if such a thought ever came to any sailor before you," Philemon speculated, taxing his classical memories. Hercules did not heed him, but went on with his reflections.

"Although his house may be girdled with garden and orchard, still he may fancy that through the changing smells and stinks of the seasons, there still pierces the pungency of the salt water. When he lies abed in his shipman's bunk he can please himself with the fancy that the wind which is kicking the leaves is in reality crisping the waves."

"You talk like a rude poet," said Philemon Minster gravely, half admiration and half abhorrence.

"Good God, I hope not," cried Hercules heartily, and he crossed himself unconsciously as he spoke, for the custom of the ancient faith still lingered even amongst those who had come to regard it as only the creed of Spain. "I speak my mind and I want no fringe to it. Tell me, lad, was there any difficulty put in the way of your task?"

Philemon Minster shook his head.

"Not a jot," he assured his friend. "The order you gave me upon Master Mannaver seemed to command Golconda. Willing hands, spirited to their work by a generous yet sensible expenditure of Spanish spoil, were brisk to realise your ambition."

"I wish I had been here to see it all," Hercules reflected, pulling at his beard moodily.

"I wish you had," Philemon agreed. "It would have entertained you to see a crazy old farmhouse fade out of existence and in its place arise the amazing edifice that your mind had schemed."

"Lord, Lord," groaned Hercules, "what sport I have missed while I have been sailing the seas."

"We had the best ship's carpenters in Plymouth to work at the job," Minster continued, "and we ran you up a comely ship with a true and proper figurehead that points its nose into the pleasantry of the kitchen garden, with a name about its bow that commemorates your own vessel and links you with *The Golden Hart*. Truly it is from the outward view lacking many things that pertain and are indeed essential to a sea-going ship. For it is sans sails and sans masts and sans cords. But, at least below decks, all is properly shipshape, with companion-ways, and cabins and ship's lanterns, and such a galley as would ravish any true minded sea-cook."

"Dear Lord, how jovial it does all sound," Hercules chuckled, rubbing his brown hands.

"Moreover," continued Philemon, "though the windows are wider than portholes they carry the porthole shape, and the stairs are balustered with sturdy rope, and the floors are all as well caulked as any ship's in the Queen's navy, and there is not a piece of timber in the whole jest that was not cut from wood that has served or was fit to serve upon the seas."

Hercules vowed that Philemon was the best fellow in the world. Philemon looked modestly gratified, but his smile suggested to Hercules that there was more to come, and there was.

"I have not forgotten your other ambition, neither," Philemon declared, as he withdrew the silk girdle from the second paper, "nor failed, as I hope, to satisfy it."

He spread out the second paper on the table and displayed to Hercules another and very different picture. Hercules uttered a joyous cry.

"Mountdragon, by the gods," he said, "Mountdragon." Philemon nodded.

"Aye," he said, "Mountdragon, and what is more a habitable Mountdragon, a dry Mountdragon, a Mountdragon that has boards on its floors and rafters to its roof, a Mountdragon that will keep out wind and weather. We have set right the ravages of time, I promise you. It cost a pretty penny to do as much, but then you had plenty of pretty pennies to spend and I had your commands, which were direct and comprehensive."

Hercules clapped his friend heartily on the shoulder.

"Bully lad," he said, "you make the best of magicians. When I was a lad and loved to roam over moorland, I came upon that same ancient castle and fell in love with it and swore myself an oath that, God willing, I would some day be its master. And now here I stand, lord of Mountdragon. Lord, it is like a fairy tale."

"Do you know why it is called Mountdragon?" asked Philemon, with the air of one that could vouchsafe the necessary information, but Hercules did not give him the chance.

"To be sure I do," he said. "It is told that a dragon lived in days of yore in the heart of the swelling hills, and was the terror of the countryside, until a gallant knight took heart and arms and slew the worm, and to commemorate the deed built him a castle on the scene of the encounter."

"I wish," mused Philemon, pensively, "that I were not so fond of such stories."

"For my part," continued Hercules, "I believe that there was no dragon at all, but just some robber baron who

would ride forth with his men to plunder and pillage on the highway and then sweep away like the wind to the safety of his den."

"Like enough," agreed Philemon. "Time that softens the asperities of this planet has smoothed the robber baron and his kind off the face of the West Country, unless you intend to revive the kind and the customs," he added with a sly smile.

"Nay," answered Hercules, "for me it shall be no more than a dwelling-place, whither I shall go when my mood calls me to be solitary. I am not like to use it much, but I should have been sorry to think that the old place was crumbling to pieces, and yet more sorry to know that it had fallen into hands that might have trimmed and pruned it into a nowadays mansion. So I have no regret for what the toy has cost me."

"How say you?" asked Philemon. "Shall we set forth at this present and bring you acquainted with *The Golden Hart*?"

"All in good time," said Hercules. "I long to see my good ship sail the field, but I will have it that we take the 'Dolphin' on our way and drink a cup there. Do you not haunt the 'Dolphin'?"

Philemon shook his head.

"I fear me," he said slowly, "that I have an over-great liking for the wines of France, wherefore I make it my duty to mortify that vanity."

Hercules seated himself upon the table, and taking a dried apple from a dish of such dainties that stood there, bit a piece out of it and chewed it.

"Why," said he as he munched, "as for that, I hold it no vanity to like so kindly a creature as wine, so long as I keep his kindness to be my servant and never my master."

Again the colour mounted into Philemon's pale cheeks.

"I find it hard," he confessed, "to keep the pleasant vassals of the passions under control. Let us, if you love me, give the 'Dolphin' the go-by and visit *The Golden Hart*."

CHAPTER IV

MY LORD OF GODALMING

THE door of the Queen's closet opened and a head cautiously intruded itself. It was the head of a small, smooth-faced man, clad in a habit that was not exactly a livery and was not exactly a specimen of individual attire. He belonged to a kind that is hard to classify, yet that is known, and has been known, all the world over in the dwellings of the great. He was perhaps the only man in all the Court who would have presumed to put his head, unpermitted and unsummoned, thus through the door that day. He was, in a sentence, one of those strange creatures, part sycophant, part adviser, part confidant and part buffoon, that seem so often to attach themselves to the intimate service of royal personages, and who in their very seeming insignificance outweigh the values of ministers and captains. What Olivier le Dain was to Louis XI., what Simon the Gascon was to William of Normandy, what Periclides the Humpback was to the Conqueror of Ind, such was this intruder to the Queen who was closeted with her sisterkins. He was a confidential servant.

Nobody was better known at Court than Jock Holiday. He had first come to London as the bearer of a present of shortcake from the King of Scots to the Queen of England. The shortcake was eaten and applauded, but the Queen appreciated even more highly the broad and rustic humour of the bearer, and Jock Holiday remained in England attached to the Queen's person. There were those who hinted that this was exactly what James Stuart had hoped for. Certainly in a short time Jock Holiday was so established a favourite that Henry of France once jestingly asked Sully to write, not to "our loving cousin Elizabeth" but to "our loving cousin Jock Holiday."

When the new-comer found that the intrusion of his head did not have the desired effect of attracting the Queen's attention, he hazarded a cough of extraordinary dryness which very nearly had the result of causing the Queen, who had again attacked the conserve and was busy with her last spoonful, to squander its precious cargo outside instead of inside her stomacher. As it was, she choked slightly in swallowing the spoonful, looked sternly at the head and spoke sternly.

"Well, sirrah, what is it?"

Jock Holiday slipped into the room, slid like a very image of discretion across the chamber till he stood between the Queen's ladies and the Queen. Then he made a humble reverence and informed his mistress that my lord of Godalming entreated audience on a matter of moment. The Queen frowned.

"A matter of moment to me or a matter of moment to him, I wonder?" she asked. The myrmidon took it upon himself to reply.

"I would wager it were a matter of moment to himself," he declared pertly, "for the old chanticleer is as brisk as if he were a cockerel and as gaudy as Tamerlane in the play."

The Queen struck the fellow lightly on the mouth with her fan.

"You must not speak so of my lord Godalming," she chided. "He is too old a friend to be denied even our privacy. And yet I wish," she added, with a rueful glance at the vessel that held the conserve, "that he could have chosen some other time for his importunity."

"Shall I tell him to go to the——" Jock Holiday began. The Queen shot him a sharp glance of reproof, but the knave shrugged his shoulders.

"I was not going to say what you think," he insisted, "or rather I was going to say it in another way. Shall I tell him to go to the King of Spain—who is surely the devil's viceroy upon earth," he added in a lower tone.

The Queen smiled.

"Tell my lord Godalming that it is our good pleasure to receive him here at this present."

The confidant bowed again and withdrew, feeling that

he had honestly earned the gift of gold pieces which my lord of Godalming had pressed into his palm.

When he had gone the Queen turned to her ladies.

"Sisterkins," she said, "you must quit me for a little, but wait in the adjoining hall, and let us all pray that my lord Godalming may be brief in his business. But set this exceeding fine conserve on yonder side-table before you go. I would not trust it among you. When you returned you would swear it had melted all in the sun, or that the cat had eaten it, or some such other excuse. I know you baggages. Be off with you."

The four maids, protesting shrilly, fluttered from the room. The last of their voluminous skirts had scarcely whisked through the door that led into the adjacent hall before the other door opened and the confidant, reappearing, announced "My lord of Godalming." Then the confidant drew back to give place to him he heralded, and my lord of Godalming came forward. The confidant withdrew, closing the door behind him, and my lord of Godalming and the Queen were face to face.

My lord of Godalming was one of the great statesmen of his age. He had grown old through the reigns of four sovereigns, but he carried his age with serenity and distinction. He had been born in the atmosphere of a Court, bred in the atmosphere of a Court; he had breathed courtly atmosphere almost all his life. A son of one of the few statesmen that contrived to preserve the favour of the eighth Henry to the end, the young Godalming was early initiated into the ways of statesmanship, and as soldier, diplomatist and counsellor he sought and attained eminence. He had been something hard put to it to keep his head on his shoulders in the reign of the Queen's sister and predecessor, but he had managed the ticklish business. His great chance came with the accession of Elizabeth, and from that moment Godalming's fortune had not faltered. Though he was never among the foremost in the public eye, he was ever one of the most intimate of the Queen's advisers. He served her with sword and with pen, with hand and with brain, and as her reign rose in glory his dignity rose with it.

The Queen surveyed her visitor with some surprise.

She knew that, as if in disdain of his years, he always dressed with the precision and choice of a young man, though without a hint of foppery, and she admired his temper and the habitual grave richness of his habit. But his attire that morning was of another fashion, a day's march ahead of his custom. Had he been standing to represent his sovereign in the presence of a congress of crowned heads he could not have been arrayed with more splendour, have proved more point-device. His clothes were all of the noblest materials, the orders upon his body, that represented the esteem of the civilised world, glowed in the colour of ribands and jewels upon their background of black and gold. She wondered what was to follow this parade of magnificence, and though she could be the most patient of women upon occasion, there was no need of patience now and she did not mean to wait upon impatience. A pair of uplifted hands and a squawk of astonishment were the briefest prelude to question.

"Well, my lord," she said, "what is the meaning of this display? My honour, it dazzles me so I must shield my poor eyes." Here she held up her fan and affected to peer coquettishly through the sticks. "It should be May Day to account for your gayness."

The statesman, for his part, had been observing the Queen with such intentness as was compatible with his dignity and his courtesy. He studied the yellow face that he had seen a thousand times, the yellow face with its crown of ruddy hair that he had watched in its change from the smooth-skinned girl into the wrinkled beldame. He knew that she thought, or affected to think, herself the smooth-skinned girl, and that all around her, including himself, assisted to encourage the affectation. Now, as ever, he found himself wondering what she really thought of herself and life, wondered to the point of delaying to reply to his mistress's question. The mistress frowned a little at the delay.

"Come, my lord," she said sharply, "our Court is not a masque for you to peacock in. Why, you carry more trinkets than a pedlar."

Her visitor bowed his head as if accepting in duty the rebuke without admitting its justice.

"Your Majesty," he answered slowly, "there are, I think, occasions in the life of every man when it is decent for him to wear his bravest apparel and make the best of himself."

The Queen looked at him quizzically. She did not know, she did not guess, what was coming, but she felt that she was being amused.

"Your Majesty," the man answered, "in the years in which I served your brother I never asked a favour of him; favour, indeed, I found beyond my merit, but never once solicited by me."

The Queen peered at him through narrowed lids, which revealed only a little of the dark eyes.

"By God," she commented, "you might say the same thing of another reign."

She was puzzled by this preliminary, wondering what the man who never asked, wanted of the woman who did not like to be asked and who was not often glad to give.

"I am pleased to hear your Majesty say so," he answered, with a low bow, "for your words anticipate and endorse the words I was about to utter. In the long years in which I have served your Greatness I have never, I believe, asked any favour at your hands, though you, at all times, have rewarded me beyond my merit."

The Queen affected to be vexed at this reference to her favours, though she was not in the least displeased and heartily liked to be thanked for them.

"You have no need," she protested, "of such humility, my lord, to back your suit. Tell me what you want, in God's name, and why you are thus rigged out."

"I come in my best," said the statesman with a faint smile, "because I come on a great occasion in my life, to make my first request of the sovereign, of the woman I adore."

He spoke the last five words in a slightly lower voice as if it were a confession he was bound to make to himself but which was not intended to reach the royal ear. It did, of course, reach the royal ear and the royal ear accepted it graciously. It was the mode at that Court for all men, from the youngest to the oldest, to be, before, beyond

and above all other matters, passionately and hopelessly in love with Gloriana. Gloriana smiled.

"Continue, my lord," she said, with what she honestly believed to be a smile. To the man opposite her, in his honesty, it was more like a grin, the grin of a great yellow cat whose mood you could never count upon. But he knew that all cats like to be patted, if the patter is apt.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I have come to ask your permission to solicit the hand in marriage of Mistress Clarend Constant."

The Queen leaned back in her chair and gaped at him. My lord, as she knew, was over seventy, and his face looked well its age though his body, thanks to abstinence and exercise, had preserved its trimness. He was for wooing Mistress Clarend Constant, who was the youngest and the loveliest of the maids of honour, who was admired by every male that came near her for her beauty!

"Are you making game of me, my lord?" she asked when she had recovered her breath. "I do not love to be played the fool with."

My lord bowed again gravely. If the Queen's outspoken astonishment caused him any pang or prick he showed no sign of either on his face.

"Your Majesty knows me well enough to be sure that I should not presume upon her goodness, or that I am ever given to unseasonable hilarity. I make my request, however strange it may naturally appear to your Majesty, in all sincerity, in all earnestness, in all hope that it may meet with your Majesty's approval."

It was quite plain that my lord was speaking the truth. Indeed the Queen had never really doubted that fact for a moment.

"Man," she cried, "what has put this crack into your head? Do you mean to tell me that so old a shepherd as yourself is, God amend us, of a mind to woo the youngest of our nymphs? I do not like to misread you, my lord, but it looks like no clean thing."

My lord's face showed quite impassive under the raillery and the suspicion of his sovereign.

"I can assure your Majesty," he said slowly, "that my thoughts in this matter are honest thoughts and honour-

able thoughts. I am no David looking for an Abishag, but a gentleman of honourable lineage and sufficient fortune to make his offer one to be considered. I bear indeed the disadvantage of a number of years, if indeed that be a disadvantage, seeing that she is sooner likely to be rid of me."

The Queen looked at him thoughtfully, weighing his words and knowing the truth of them. He was a great lord with a great name and great possessions. There was, probably, no free woman in England who would not be glad of such a chance; certainly there would be none if it were known that the Queen approved of the marriage.

The Queen looked at him with renewed wonder. Could it be possible, she asked herself, that he had really outgrown the passion of his past; that the wish for fidelity possessed him no more. His wooing and his winning of his lady had been like a tale out of Malory; his married happiness had been a marvel in days when the record of a much married and an unluckily married king was a near memory. It had always been taken for granted that his grief for his lady's loss had shut the door of his heart against any further thoughts of love or even of liking; and this assumption had been justified through more years than the Queen cared to compute. And now all of a sudden, in the winter of his years, here he was desirous to unite himself in wedlock with the youngest minx at Court. The Queen weighed Godalming's denials of ignoble desire with her habitual cynicism and was scarcely prepared to believe them. But that, after all, was his affair, his and the maid's. If he was willing to pay for such a plaything and she was willing to be paid for, it was not business of hers to interfere in the matter. She owed Godalming too much gratitude to cross his wish in so cheap a courtesy as this.

"My lord," she said, "I had it in my mind that your heart was elsewhere."

He knew what she meant well enough, but he made as if he did not know. There was no escaping the courtly etiquette which assumed the worship of the incomparable Gloriana.

"Alas!" he sighed. "I am no eagle to gaze at the sun."

The Queen was pleased now, as she was always pleased, by the extravagance. But she affected to condemn.

"Hush, my lord," she said, "we do not, would not, understand you. In what I said I meant that your heart was still with a dear memory."

My lord bowed his head, and for a moment a faint show of colour tinged his cheeks, only to go as swiftly as it came. He was thinking, as the Queen was thinking, of the one love of his life, the love that was buried in the chapel of his race under a great splendour of marble trappings. He gave no direct answer to the Queen's words.

"It is my sincere wish," he repeated, "to ask for the hand of the Lady Clarendon Constant. If your Majesty will be pleased to approve of my suit you will give me great content."

"There is another matter to consider," the Queen suggested with a leer. "Oh, my good lord, think of the peril in which you place that honourable forehead. Why, there is the full half of a century between you. How shall twenty consort with seventy save on unhappy terms? You will surely find some brisk young cuckoo slipping into your cold nest when your elderly back is turned."

Still the face of the ancient statesman did not betray the least dissatisfaction at the Queen's somewhat heavy-handed pleasantry.

"That, your Majesty," he replied calmly, "is for the future to determine, and no one, not even a monarch, is prophet enough to know what the future may be for the least or the greatest of his subjects. I can only hope that, when I come to be married, my wife will carry herself in a manner befitting to the name she bears."

He spoke with such a simple dignity and looked so gallant and confident as he spoke, that for a moment the Queen could almost believe that he and she were many years younger, back again in those brave days when handsome Godalming was her chief prop. For a queer instant she felt really young again, not merely young with the sham youth of her "sisterkins" business, and she felt grateful to him for the experience. But because of the element in her nature which forced her to resent the turn of any man's

thoughts to another than herself she could not or would not refrain from teasing him a little.

"If you go on with this business, my lord," she said, "I very much fear that the young gallants will laugh at you."

"They may laugh at me behind my back," said the old courtier composedly, "but I think I can promise your Majesty that they will not laugh at me to my beard. I still wear a blade that has been proud, now and then, to take the air for your Majesty's service, and those that would make merry with me would find that my hand of sword is well nigh as good as ever."

This was indeed true, for the hand that he clapped to the hilt of his weapon still showed all the strength and something of the smoothness of its prime.

Elizabeth surveyed the veteran with curiosity and admiration. She had, however, all her father's frankness of speech and did not allow herself to be hag-ridden by any unnecessary delicacy of thought or phrase.

"Why, you old fool," she cried, but she gave the term good-humouredly as a cat will give a good-humoured cuff with its paw, "you are not so vain I pray as to hope for an heir of your body at this time of day."

My lord shook his head without any show of annoyance at the Queen's bluntness.

"I hold neither such a hope nor such a wish," he said. "I have in my nephew a youth who will in his due time uphold the family honour and employ the family wealth. But until that time come let us suppose that I find myself a little lonely, what you please. If the lady I speak of accept my offer I can endow her very nobly without in any way wronging or despoiling him who shall inherit my titles and estates."

This was undoubtedly true as the Queen knew very well. Such an offer was a mighty chance for a maid in the situation of Clenda Constant, and her family would rejoice at the chance, whatever the young lady herself might think of the matter.

"Great Heavens, my lord," asked the Queen impatiently, "have you duly reflected upon the consequences of your folly? Do you know anything of this child's mind? I cannot think that you are very well acquainted with her."

"I have had very little speech with the young lady," my lord admitted composedly, "very little speech indeed. But I believe I can divine something of her character."

"I hope you do not misjudge your powers, my dear lord," said Elizabeth with an irony in her voice which had no effect upon her listener. "Why, I will tell you a thing she was saying but a little while before your entry. She was saying that what she would like best in the world would be the command of unlimited money and the liberty to do exactly as she liked."

My lord smiled faintly.

"Did she indeed say that? It is a wish, I fancy, that has been entertained by a good many young women since the world began. The meaning of such a wish depends upon its execution when the wisher has the power to execute it."

"I see you are an obstinate dog," the Queen said, "and very much set upon your dainty quarry. Well, go your way and win your damsel with my free consent and countenance. But you must not talk in my presence of drawing swords and fighting duels for you know well that these are errors of which we sternly disapprove."

She did not look stern, however, as she rose from her seat to signify to my lord that his audience had come to an end. There was a humorous smile on her lips, but in her strange eyes there lurked an unfamiliar kindness, an unfamiliar pity: kindness for the old friend and faithful servant who had the good sense to ask so small a reward, pity for the hard rubs which, as it seemed to her, fortune had inevitably in store for him.

My lord dropped easily on one knee, and taking his sovereign's hand lifted it to his lips.

"I thank your Majesty with all my heart," he said, and there was a straightforwardness in his voice which was better than more florid assurances. Then with another profound bow he quitted the presence, leaving his Queen standing and staring after him with a smiling mouth and a puzzled brow.

CHAPTER V

WORLDLY WISDOM

FOR a little while after the departure of my lord Godalming the Queen remained standing with a queer smile on her lips and queer thoughts in her mind. Then she moved slowly towards the door through which the maids of honour had retreated, as if to summon them back. As if suddenly restrained by second and better thoughts she turned to the table that carried the guava jelly and with some rapid play of her silver spoon made away with the major portion of that sweetmeat. She wiped her lips gingerly—on account of the colour they carried—with a sigh of satisfaction, and then crossing the room anew opened the door of communication with the room in which the maids were penned.

The maids inside the room huddled together at the far end and tattling in whispers saw the door open and poised for a run expectant to be summoned in a body to their royal playmate's side. To their surprise, however, they heard the voice of Elizabeth call but one of their number and that one Clarendon Constant. Her three companions stared at her in surprise.

"What is the meaning of this?" whispered one. "You are in for a wiggling," sniggered another, and "Are you to be chief favourite?" queried a third.

Clarendon shook her pretty head in sign of her own inability to understand this special command and then with something of a stir in her heart, for like every one else she was afraid of the great Queen, she entered the neighbouring room, fearing a reprimand. It is true that she was not conscious of having committed any offence, but the humour of Elizabeth was so capricious in its manifestations that no one ever knew what to expect at her hands. She saw at once however that the Queen had a smile on her face of

positive amiability as well as of covert compassion and her spirits lifted.

"Come here, child," said the Queen graciously. "I have a word or two for your private ear."

She was about to seat herself and was actually motioning to Clarendra to take a place by her side when an idea seemed suddenly to occur to her. She moved with greater celerity than might have been expected to the door of communication and opened it. The sisterkins, as if moved by a common purpose, had begun to go softly a-tiptoe across the floor. But when the door suddenly gaped and the head of Elizabeth appeared in the opening, observing them with a malicious grin, the young women stood as if turned to stone, while the Medusa-head that had petrified them spoke.

"I thought as much," the Queen said drily. "No listening at my doors if you please, young women. You will each of you be so good as to learn the third chapter of Saint Augustine's Confessions by heart before I see you again. You will find the book yonder in the alcove."

Then the royal head disappeared and the routed maidens retreated in disorder to the distant couch and the mutual study of the specified saint. The Queen came back to Clarendra wheezing a little from her exertion, but laughing between her wheezes.

"The jades," she said gaily, "the baggages. I guessed their intention. But they shall not steal a march upon me. I have been young myself"—she hastily corrected herself—"I have been younger, and know the convenience of a keyhole. But we will sit out of ear-shot."

She took the perplexed Clarendra by the hand and led her to the window-seat where the pair sat side by side. Clarendra was trying in vain to guess what all this might portend.

"My child," Elizabeth said, "have you ever given a thought to getting married?"

Clarendra got very red, for the thought had occurred to her as a possibility in the case of more than one attentive Court gentleman whose attentions had not however yet taken the form of any definite proposal. Most especially in the case of one attentive Court gentleman.

"I see you have," the Queen said a little sourly, noting

the girl's colour. "That is ever the way with girls nowadays. For my own part as you know I have preferred the virgin state though I have been more besought in marriage than any queen in Christendom. However, we cannot all think the same and the world must be peopled."

This somewhat blunt way of considering the subject rather embarrassed Clarendra, and her embarrassment was not decreased when the Queen, as if recollecting something she had forgotten, fell a-laughing violently and exclaimed: "Not in this instance, though!" Clarendra did not understand but she guessed that the intention was skittish.

The Queen made an end of her hilarity as suddenly as she had begun it.

"Well," she continued, "now the time has come for giving a second thought to the subject. What would you say if I were to tell you that I have a suitor in hand for you?"

The Queen eyed Clarendra as she spoke, with her head on one side like a parrot, and with such an odd mixture of roguishness and pity in her glance that poor Clarendra was quite put about and bewildered.

"Indeed, your Majesty," she managed to stammer, "I do not know what to say."

"Nonsense," said the Queen sharply, "all girls know what to say when their marriage is talked of. I know what to say and my answer always is: 'No, I thank you.' But most maids have an itch for the ring and the kissing, so speak up, sisterkin, and spare me these preambles."

"I mean, your Majesty," pleaded Clarendra, "that I know not what to say until your Majesty is pleased to be more definite."

"Do you mean that you want to know the name of your suitor-man?" asked the Queen with some asperity.

That was exactly what Clarendra did mean, and she murmured a "Yes, your Majesty" faintly. There was a wild hope in her heart that her Majesty was about to name a certain name.

"There is no need to beat about the bush in this business," said the Queen. "My lord of Godalming asks for your hand."

My lord of Godalming! A sudden earthquake, shaking the strong foundations of the palace and pitching the

reeling walls upon her, could not have more astounded Clarendo. My lord of Godalming, the old, the wise, the frigid, the precise, my lord of Godalming with years enough easily to be her grandfather, my lord of Godalming with whom she had scarcely ever exchanged a word and never a glance, my lord of Godalming who seemed as remote from her youth and freshness as any of the ancestral pictures in the great gallery, my lord of Godalming who was alive in the reign of King Henry the eighth, and very likely of King Henry the seventh for that matter! Clarendo peeped at the Queen's face to see if she were making game of her, indulging in some cryptic jest at her expense. But the Queen's wrinkled face was by now rigid with gravity. A thought occurred to the bewildered maid, and she faltered it into words.

"For his nephew, your Majesty?" she questioned in a voice that sounded like a prayer. At least my lord of Godalming's nephew was a young man though he was not much to Clarendo's liking. The Queen rapped out a full-blooded Tudor oath.

"Who is talking of nephews?" she said. "When I name a name, I mean that name. My lord of Godalming does you the honour to solicit your hand in marriage, though devil take me if I can understand why he does so."

Clarendo sat for an age as it seemed to her, though it was but a poor few seconds, in a silence of stone. My lord of Godalming wanted to marry her, wanted to clasp her freshness in his withered arms, to hold her loveliness to his faded breast. It was terrible but also it was very wonderful, for my lord was one of the greatest nobles in England, one of the wealthiest men in the realm, one of the most famous soldiers and statesmen of the age. For all that her birth was good, she was as compared with him no better than a butterwoman. It was little less marvellous than being sought in marriage by a crowned head. She glanced piteously at the Queen.

"What does your Majesty wish me to do?" she bleated.

Elizabeth gave a snort of contempt.

"What do I wish you to do? God have mercy, mistress, have you no brains of your own in your skull or no guts of your own in your body? It is not I that my lord of

Godalming solicits in marriage, though of course he would have done so long ago if he had been fool enough to believe that he had the least glimmer of hope. It is you I tell you, idiot, to whom he is doing this great honour, and you gape at me like a dead fish and ask what I would have you do."

"I beseech your Majesty not to be angry with me," Clarendo entreated, "but I am young and inexperienced, and would naturally be fain to have your Majesty's advice in so grave a matter."

This was not the happiest way of appealing to the Queen's sympathies, and the frown on Elizabeth's face proclaimed the fact.

"I am not so old and experienced as you are pleased to pretend," she said sourly. The thin trickle of her fountain of pity was now dried up by the sirocco of irritation. "If I were in your shoes, which let me tell you are pretty ragged ones, and woefully down at heel, and I were aware of a brood of hungry birds in the home-nest, I should thank Heaven on my knees for such a suitor."

In her sad little heart Clarendo knew that the Queen spoke sound good sense according to the wisdom of the world. Come yesterday, it would have as soon occurred to her to be married to the King of France as to the great English peer and statesman. Her own uncertain ambitions had veered in a far more modest direction. In a staggering flash she saw all that this new thing would mean to her, saw that it would be madness to decline, to deny. Still she boggled a little at the certainty, weakly.

"Does your Majesty advise——" she began, but the Queen cut her short very briskly.

"My Majesty advises nothing," she said emphatically. "If you are ass enough not to know what it means when a fortune beyond your dreams or your deserts is laid at your feet, it is not for me to try and mend your folly. You must make up your mind for yourself if you have a mind to make up."

There was a small measure of silence in the room. The two women still sat close together, the young woman with her eyes on the toes of her shoes, as if she sought counsel from those simple oracles, the elder woman watch-

ing her companion and pitying her and despising her and envying her.

Presently the great Queen clapped her hands together so sharply that the concussion sounded through the room like the crack of a pistol shot.

"Enough of consideration," she said decisively. "Tell me at once what answer I shall deliver to my lord of Godalming."

Clarenda lifted a dreary face to the Queen. There were tears in her eyes but she kept them there and would not let them brim over on to her cheeks. A rapid review of her case had made it plain to her with a poignancy of insistence that there was only the one thing possible for her to do under her hard conditions.

"Will your Majesty be so good," she said as steadily as she could manage, "as to tell my lord Godalming that I am more honoured than I can say by his proffer, and that I am his humble servant to command."

"That's a sensible lass," said Elizabeth. She gave the girl a push on the shoulder that came nigh to overbalance her and fling her to the floor. "Now hasten to your chamber and cry out the cry your head is a-swimming with, and look to it that you do not come before me again save with a smiling face."

CHAPTER VI

PAINTED FULL OF TONGUES

THERE was a hubbub in the microcosm that is called a Court on the day when the news was bruited abroad that my lord Godalming had offered the greatness of his name to Mistress Clarendon Constant. In hall and corridor, in chamber and ante-chamber, in alcove and nook, in the embrasures of deep windows, on wide stairs and narrow stairs, in porches and doorways, in gardens and out-houses, nothing else was talked about. Faces, pale or red with excitement, according to the physical humours of their owners, stared into faces likewise pale or red, as the quivering lips volleyed the inevitable question, "Have you heard the news?" There was no one from the highest to the lowest, from my lord Privy Seal to my lad Page of the Buttery, that was not amazed to hear the story and alert to transmit it. So swiftly did the tidings spread through the Court that many of its messengers speeding their round in breathless heat of delivery told their tale a second time to one at a back door whose ear they had already enriched with the business a few minutes before at the front door.

The once languid air hummed. Nimble young ladies picked up their petticoats and ran as if for their lives to tell their dearest friend. Brisk young gentlemen and obese elderly gentlemen competed after the manner of the hare and the tortoise. It was a stirring time.

At first the world of Court was frankly incredulous. Was it conceivable that a noble of such age and gravity as my lord Godalming should seriously intend at his time of life to wed with a grig of but twenty, a chit, a minx? Surely my lord Godalming had too much wisdom, too much philosophy, too much respect for convention and decorum and the decencies to commit such an act of folly. But when presently it was confirmed with so much circumstance

that there seemed little freedom left for incredulity, then the more knowing of the courtiers began to wag their heads and tap their noses or their foreheads and to treat the news with hilarity. There was much grinning and sniggering on the part of the men, much giggling and tittering on the part of the women. Not indeed in the presence of my lord of Godalming. What he had said to the Queen was quite true and well calculated to make impertinence air a mask of politeness on the part of the men when my lord passed by. On the part of the women too; for with all his gravity of courtesy there could be a sternness in his carriage and a sharpness in his speech of which the flightiest damsel might well stand in awe. But behind his back surely there must be ample licence for jocularly, and the Court was preparing for such jocoseness when a fresh piece of news came blowing about the passages which froze the merriment on their lips.

It seemed that her Majesty not merely sanctioned the match but honoured it with her hearty approval, and had, it further seemed, made it plain in speech that those who wished to stand well in her favour would be wise to share her view of the matter. Whereupon everybody veered round with astonishing celerity and declared with no less astonishing unanimity, that the proposed nuptials were altogether admirable and ideal and delightful.

In the midst of all this fluster who so cool or so wise or so silent as Jock Holiday? He stood statue-like to be beaten upon by all the winds of rumour, all the tongues of question, and like the god Harpocrates sealed the lips of knowledge with the finger of discretion. Of course he knew the truth; of course every one knew that he knew the truth, but he would still keep mum with an air of surly nonchalance that was very irritating to the Court. Yet in the end it was he who, when the genteel mob had decided that the Queen must certainly disapprove of the betrothal, routed it into ignominious retreat with the assurance, which from his mouth was nothing less than oracular, that my lord of Godalming had the Queen's very good will in the business.

Through all this clutter and murmur my lord of Godalming stalked as serenely as if nothing were occurring at all out of the ordinary. His face wore its habitual austere

composure; his demeanour showed no change in its familiar pride. It did not indeed seem that ridicule could in any wise attach itself to that stately presence, and those who regarded him were almost forced to admit that it might indeed be a judicious thing for a gentleman of seventy to wed a maid of twenty. On thinking it over the old doubts would return and they would shake their heads and purse their lips. But their doubts did not trouble my lord, though he was surely well aware of them, and he saw nothing of the head-shakings and the mouth-pursings.

It must be admitted that the Queen, having once given her consent, acted with generosity in the giving. She did, as has been seen, make it known that she approved and that she expected her friends to share her approval; and she did this with a show of whole-heartedness that impressed itself upon the courtiers like a seal-royal upon wax. Never by the slightest hint of change of tone or countenance did she allow any of those that came nearest her to presume to suspect that she did not mean what she said.

Perhaps something of the secret of the Queen's suavity was to be found in two facts, neither of which was a secret to Jock Holiday, if it was a secret to the rest of the world. The first fact was that her Majesty, for all her show of friendship and admiration, had in the heart of her heart very little real liking for Clarendon Constant. But there was a second fact known to Jock Holiday, if to but few others—no more it may be than three—and that second fact was the existence of a certain young gentleman at Court, the very young gentleman who fluttered into Clarendon's thoughts so tumultuously when her Majesty broke the tidings of my lord Godalming's odd wooing. This young gentleman was Sir Batty Sellars, a scion of an ancient house that had managed to inscribe the names of its offspring upon the pay-list of royal purses through many generations with no fastidious regard to any other auspice than the favouring wind.

There had frequently if not incessantly been a Batty Sellars—the family liked the Christian name, for it came from a property into which they had married—playing his petty part in the background of history. The Sellars were

great in the art of office-holding and the name occurs patiently from the days of the third Edward.

The present Sir Batty was a young gentleman of small estate and great appetites who, thanks to a handsome face, a fine body and remarkably good fortune at cards, managed to cut a pretty figure at Court. He held there a small office under the Lord Chamberlain, that of the Master of the Lesser Revels, which, though its duties and privileges were very vague and undetermined, afforded him occasional opportunities for obliging or disobliging, as the case might be, and so enriched him with a kind of false influence and importance. Many women had liked him, but few indeed liked him for long or failed to regret that they had ever liked him a little. Men of a kindred temperament got on with him well enough when they were content to accept his supremacy. For the rest he took, or thought he took, a large and philosophic view of life, but he affected to be engrossed by trifles, which was politic as it served to make him Master of the Lesser Revels.

The ladies of the Court admired Sir Batty Sellars in varying degrees of admiration. Perhaps if Jock Holiday had condescended to unlock his heart he would have hinted that the greatest admiration was given by the greatest lady, and that no eyes grew warmer than the old brown Tudor eyes when they rested upon the gracious face and shapely body of Sir Batty Sellars. It is not impossible that Sir Batty himself may have had some inkling of the favourable impression that he made upon a heart that still responded to emotions, above those vast hoops and beneath the pyramids of ridiculous wigs. If he had he was careful not to presume upon the possibility. Like every other gentleman at Court he assumed that he was the joyful victim of a tragic and yet enchanting passion for the divine Gloriana. But though Sir Batty was quite aware of the value of his Sovereign's favour, he was also aware of its disadvantages, and he was not willing to risk collision with the recognised favourite unless he was sure of his game. This was very characteristic of Sir Batty, who was of all things a gamester, and of that especial kind who never play unless they are pretty sure of winning, and who generally manage to win.

CHAPTER VII

SIR BATTY HEARS NEWS

ON the afternoon of the day on which my lord of Godalming had paid his visit to the Queen and made his amazing request Sir Batty Sellars was seated at cards in his apartment in the palace, for by virtue of his office he occupied a small set of rooms at Court. He was enjoying himself with a fullness of enjoyment which made no mark upon the trained tranquillity of his handsome face, for he was winning more heavily than usual in the pastime at which it was his familiar habit to win. His companion was a wealthy young squireen from the West Country and a distant kinsman of his own, Master John Willoughby, of Willoughby Homing, in the Tavistock region. He was now on a first visit to London and tasting its delights under the patronage of Sir Batty, whom as a matter of course he regarded as little less than a demigod.

To this pair, thus employed and indifferent to the fair day outside the windows, came in a hurry Sir Batty's very particular friend Master Spencer Winwood, with a countenance that flamed with information.

Sir Batty played his card with judgment before he lifted his head in salutation to his friend. Jack Willoughby, disturbed by the intrusion, played badly and lost the round. Sir Batty's practised hand covered the stakes and swept them into his pocket while his dark inscrutable eyes, fixed on the intruder's face, read news there.

"What ails you, Spencer?" he asked, with that affectation of languor which he wore like a feather or a jewel, as a grace to his virile beauty and strong person. "Why do you come tumbling into my room as if it were a tavern parlour and put honest gentlemen off their game?"

He indicated with a jerk of his head Willoughby who,

with his jolly red countryfied face a little drawn and puckered with calculation, and his hands deep in his breeches pockets, was looking somewhat ruefully at the disappointing cards.

"I carry news that may interest you," answered the newcomer, "but it is for your private ear," he added in response to Sir Batty's brief suggestion to say his say.

"Oh," said Sir Batty, who had followed his friend's glance at the disconsolate gambler, "you may say what you like in this gentleman's presence. He is my very good friend and he shall be yours, I trust. Master John Willoughby, this is Master Spencer Winwood, my lord Bolton's son."

The two men thus presented saluted one another, Spencer Winwood with indifference and the other with the pleased look of one that feels he is moving in very good society.

"And now," said Sir Batty as he methodically gathered and shuffled the cards, "what is this news you are so big with?"

"It would inflate a bigger man than myself," answered Winwood, "and it should stagger you, or I am mistook. My lord Godalming solicits the hand in marriage of Mistress Clarendon Constant."

Sir Batty received that statement with a wholly unmoved countenance and his fine hands continued their task of mixing the cards as steadily as if they were of more interest to him than the tidings he had just heard—which they were not.

"Young man, I think you're lying," he said, lightly parodying a line from the ballad of "Barbara Allen," but in his mind he hoped otherwise. Instantly Spencer Winwood was hot in confirmation.

"Indeed and indeed it is true," he protested. "Like yourself I was sceptic at first, for the thing seemed unbelievable. But I made bold to ask Jock Holiday with whom I chance to be on good terms and he gave me the nod. It is true as true. My lord has asked and had the Queen's permission to marry the lass."

Sir Batty gave a prolonged whistle. Mr. Winwood seemed gratified that his news had produced its effect. Master Willoughby, as a stranger, begged to be informed

why the matter was of such moment as to be worth while interrupting a good game.

"Tell him, Spencer," commanded Sir Batty, with his chin on his breast. He was evidently thinking hard and seemed not displeased with his thoughts. Spencer Winwood turned to Willoughby with a slightly supercilious affability.

"You must know," he said, "that Mistress Clarendon Constant is one of the comeliest maids, if not the comeliest maid, at Court. It should not therefore surprise you, as you have the honour to be acquainted with Sir Batty, that the young lady has been fortunate enough to earn the approval of our friend."

Jack Willoughby glanced at Sir Batty with very honest and open admiration and generous envy. He thought him, and rightly thought him, one of the handsomest men in the world and one of the most accomplished in all the arts that go to the making of the complete gentleman. Spencer Winwood continued his tale.

"Sellars has a winning way"—Willoughby thought of the game and nodded involuntarily—"and he is already far in the girl's graces. But because she is of a simple rusticity she believes that he woos her to be his wife, which indeed is very far from his purpose."

Now Mr. Willoughby was at heart a decent fellow enough, who in the simplicity of Willoughby Homing had always regarded fine ladies with a respectful shyness very different from the conduct of his rustic amours. But as his present ambition was to be regarded as a sad dog, he murmured approvingly that he should think not indeed. Spencer Winwood continued without noticing him.

"Not that the girl is unworthy of wedlock if her farthingale covered a fortune. But she is as poor as you please, with scarce pin-money to buy herself smocks, and she can only move at Court through the Queen's bounty. So naturally our Batty stalks the dainty game with another purpose. But that, too, has its dangers."

Mr. Willoughby glancing at Sir Batty as if for enlightenment on this point and finding him still absorbed in his reflections, addressed Mr. Winwood and desired to be informed as to the nature of the dangers he referred to.

"Why, you must know," Winwood replied, "that her

Majesty is a very particular piece of virginity, and will stand no trifling with the virtue of her women. It would be as much as a man's head were worth to lead one of them astray, wherefore, as you may guess, our Batty has in his sense and discretion decided that although the game is well worth some risk it were wise under existing conditions to go warily."

As before Mr. Willoughby nodded his head and strove to impart to his broad countrified countenance an air at once of sagacity and vice. Now, however, Sir Batty chose to break silence.

"You speak like an oracle, Spencer," he protested, "but if your news be true, as no doubt it is, then it seems to me that my case has changed very much for the better. The devil only knows what has put it into old Godalming's head to marry the girl. I always took him for an archangel among patriarchs, but I suppose dried flesh is a kind of tinder. As for me, my lady Godalming will be easier to win to my wish than the spinster Clarendon."

The others cheerfully agreed with this view of the case; Mr. Winwood because he understood the conditions and Mr. Willoughby because he did not. Then since, as Sir Batty pointed out, there was nothing better for them to do, the party fell to playing cards again and continued at that pastime until all Master Willoughby's immediate cash had changed hands and was snugly ensconced in Sir Batty's pockets. At which point Sir Batty mentioned that he had an appointment to keep, and politely but decisively showed his guest the door. Mr. Willoughby went out into London convinced that he had passed a diverting afternoon in very excellent company.

CHAPTER VIII

LOVERS' MEETINGS

CLARENDA CONSTANT had not allowed herself to form any final judgment upon Batty Sellars nor to take any exact stock of the state of her own mind with regard to him. She was not of an age that troubles itself much about final judgments or close analysis of mood. When first she came to Court friendless, save for the exalted patronage of the Queen, a little frightened, not a little bewildered, painfully conscious of a not over apparent provincialism, and of her needy kinsfolk in Kent, she was, according to etiquette, early presented to the Master of the Lesser Revels. For her, coming like a country bird out of the rural darkness into the courtly light and blinking timidly at the illumination, the sudden presentation to Sir Batty Sellars and his instant graciousness were wonders to remember. From the first moment of their meeting she admired the splendid gentleman. As she grew easy in the Court and familiar with its ways their acquaintance waxed into friendship and more than friendship. In the beginning she had found him most diverting company, but she soon found that he was very much more than merely diverting company. He aired a cynicism which was really ingrain, with an air that made it seem the affectation shielding an earnest and sincere nature from the roughness and hardness of an unsympathetic world. He could jest with smiling lips and sad eyes after a fashion that must needs puzzle and trouble a girl's skill-less heart. Not that he ever for a moment played the lackadaisy or aimed to gain a morsel of his cause by the moving of pity. He might pass anywhere for a model courtier; he was a noted swordsman with a wit as sharp as his steel, a paragon of dancers, a clever musician, and he was moreover endowed with a sufficient gift of rhyme to turn a madrigal in praise of a pretty lady

that had almost the true smack of Helicon. Add to this that he was notorious for his bravery as for his beauty, for his gallantries as for his graces, and that Clarendo Constant had a natural and commendable liking for comely men.

From the first moment of Mistress Clarendo's arrival at Court, Sir Batty had mentally marked her for his own. So radiant was her beauty, so patent its effect upon all who witnessed it, that Sir Batty, in whose composition vanity was one of the most vigorous ingredients, would have been quite willing to make her my lady Sellars, if only the splendour of her fortune had equalled the splendour of her face. But as it did nothing of the kind, as in fact Clarendo's face was Clarendo's fortune, Sir Batty had to reconsider his position. He took it for granted that he would marry sooner or later, and it was essential to his sense of the fitness of things, in a world which in his view pivoted upon Batty Sellars, that dame Sellars should be surpassing fair. To do Sir Batty justice he would not have wedded ugliness with the wealth of Ind behind her. The thought that his wife could be other than the ideal of admiration and desire simply revolted him. But, on the other hand, beauty alone—were it the beauty of Helen or Semiramis or Cleopatra—was of no use without accompanying lucre to a young gentleman of meagre patrimony who eked out his slender appointment at Court by the dexterity, or rather the spirit of divination, with which he played cards.

So when he recognised that Mistress Clarendo, if indeed a goddess, would have to be worshipped as the goddess of poverty, he quietly flung marriage from the calculations of his game and set himself to consider how he might otherwise, and without inconvenience, obtain possession of the young lady's affections. The thought "without inconvenience," represented an important clause in his charter. While he relied upon himself very confidently to overcome any Puritan scruples with which the young lady might be burdened, he knew also that he could rely upon the Queen to resent very fiercely and to punish very severely the offender who was the cause of any kind of public scandal concerning one of the maids of honour.

He was indeed very much of a favourite with the Queen, but he was too well versed in the history of Court favourites in general and of Elizabeth's favourites in particular to be sure of the safety of his head if the anger of the virgin Gloriana were once aroused. Wherefore he decided to pick his path warily, with a gay patience, and to lose no opportunity of establishing himself in the thoughts of his coveted quarry. He was a great believer in the waiting game, whether with the playing cards of the painted pack or the playing cards that are called men and women.

His waiting game won him a very prominent place in Mistress Clarendra's imagination. He was at once so devoted and so gallant; his proclaimed tenor of chivalry was broken by such happy snatches of audacity either asserted or suggested; he could look so much while saying so little that he presented himself to the girl's flighty fancy as the most captivating riddle in the world. He easily made it plain to the maid that he was tropically in love with her; yet while the delicious intimacy at once increased and became more secret the attractive wooer never for a moment translated his passion into the formality of declaration.

Clarendra lived in the delirium of residence on a volcano while all around her smiled a landscape of serenity and beauty. Of course the silly minion had no more idea of what was in the mind of the man than the bird in the bush has of the mind of the cat that stalks it in the covert. She had come to Court in a cloud of rustic ignorance through which the future appeared as a pleasing perspective of gaieties and merry-makings. These were to persevere indefinitely, but would no doubt make an end with some wealthy and commendable husband and some snug manor-house with a girdle of broad acres, that would offer stablishment and shelter for needy kindred.

But as Sir Batty was not the only man at Court so he was not Clarendra's sole admirer. She was so amazingly fair to behold that every eye, roving or steadfast, was attracted and every voice was tuned to whisper civilities. If the Queen saw all this idolatry with a raging displeasure that fed upon her liver, in such a case she had the will and the skill to keep her rancour to herself and to beam upon her sisterkin with extravagant effulgence. At least,

such was Sir Batty's skill and discretion, the Queen did not suspect her Master of the Lesser Revels of any special admiration for the fair stranger. It was scarcely to be wondered at if under such conditions the lovely head of Clarendon was turned and her vanity so flattered that she began to develop into a model of self-conceit. She breathed an atmosphere of incense, she trod a pathway that was, allegorically speaking, carpeted by the mantles of gallants eager to repeat for the Clarendon of to-day what the young Raleigh had ventured for the Elizabeth of long ago. She was quite ready to take every courtier's tinkling phrase for the very voice of Love's oracle and to believe herself the comeliest and wittiest she in the universe just because a certain number of light-hearted and light-headed young gentlemen—without or with sinister purpose—chose to tell her so.

It did not occur to her to weigh seriously the fact that none of all this multitude of adorers converted his admiration into the definite terms of a proposal of marriage. None, at least that signified, none whose estate could command the consideration of a young lady who had not a penny in her pocket and whose family was in the greatest straits to rub along with any show of gentility. There was, it is true, Master Reuben Peaching, a poor knight's son and a small officer at Court, who talked some nonsense about the love of shepherd for shepherdess and who was so heartily laughed at for his pains that he left Court in a huff and voyaged to the Virginias where, as it turned out, he did very well and made a pretty fortune. There was too Mr. Secretary Brenthal who wrote her a number of neat rhymes in the most approved manner expressing the heat of his passion with great frigidity of language and assuring her—for he also was poor—that content was better than wealth, a doctrine so patently untrue that Clarendon openly derided him in her hoydenish way and in consequence drove the young man for a period to the consolation of strong liquor until the rebellion of a weak stomach and a weak head restored him to his senses and landed him in wedlock with a ripe and ripely dowered spinster.

It was not, therefore, until my lord of Godalming paid

his historic visit to the Queen and made his amazing offer that Clarendra began for the first time to realise the loneliness and the discomfort of her position. The Queen was neither unwilling nor displeased to have an opportunity, under cover of the giving of good counsel, of administering a few stripes to the shoulders of a girl who had committed the offence of being too pretty. Clarendra saw the force of the Queen's reasoning sufficiently clearly to surrender. Her first anxiety, after quitting the presence, was to see Sir Batty and tell him her tale. This was no difficult matter to bring about, for she and he had of late, by a series of consistent accidents, contrived to meet and walk in the Gilded Gallery in a vacant hour of each day's afternoon. This indeed was the appointment on account of which Sir Batty had sent Jack Willoughby about his business. On meeting in this same gallery the pair never failed to express their surprise at the happy chance and never failed to take advantage of it by straying into the Land of Tenderness. Sir Batty could be as euphuistic as the best, and Clarendra loved to exercise her sprightliness in a game of wits that was more dangerous than she guessed.

But to-day their encounter, stripped of affectation by surprise, had a more work-a-day carriage. The maid was agitated, the man was amazed; the one was anxious to tell what the other was eager to hear. Hurriedly they seated themselves on a bench.

"Sir Batty," cried Clarendra, in a voice that was suddenly free of its wonted languors and laughters, "Sir Batty, have you heard the news?"

"I have heard a piece of news," Sir Batty answered, "that has much astonished me, and I am hot to learn of its truth or falsehood from your lips."

"It is true," cried Clarendra, "all too true. Your poor little country mouse is caught in a golden trap and cannot get away from it."

"Then you are to be my lady Godalming," Sir Batty said. Clarendra could not understand why so little dissatisfaction sounded in his voice. "You will be one of the greatest ladies in the land."

This was not at all the kind of speech she had expected to hear from Sir Batty and the matter of it angered her.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" she cried sharply, and turned of one side as if she would go her ways. Sir Batty perceived that he was in danger of making a mistake.

"What can a poor gentleman like myself do against the fulminations of Providence," he pleaded, with a look of such eloquent reproach as melted Clarendra's heart. "For, as I have heard the story, my lord of Godalming has not only sought your hand, but you have accorded it to him. Am I wrong in this latter particular?"

Clarendra shook her head. She was very near to crying now because she could not deny the statement. My lord of Godalming seemed more ancient and dreadful than ever as she contrasted him with Sir Batty, in his beauty, his youth, his grace, all his courtly charm.

"What can I do?" she answered, half sobbing. "It is a great match and I am a dowerless daughter, and the Queen favours my lord's proposal and tells me roundly that I would be a fool for my pains if I were not to jump at it—and so I suppose I should be. And besides I have to think of my family."

"Perhaps they will not consent to your making such a sacrifice," Sir Batty suggested. In his mind he was very sure that they would consent very readily, but he felt that it was politic in him to show eagerness for any chance. Clarendra shook her head.

"They will consent," she said, "of course they will consent. I take it that they would insist if I showed any sign of resistance, and it is no more than God's truth that I could not blame them for so doing. How would you act, I should like to know, if the Queen suddenly made up her mind to marry and offered her royal hand to Sir Batty Sellars."

Sir Batty was perfectly sure that he would clutch eagerly at the skinny fingers, but he looked a tender reproach at the excited girl and murmured that, after all, my lord of Godalming was not a king.

"He is as good as one for me," the girl persisted. "I dare be sworn that he has more money than some of them. He has boundless possessions and, if he chose, could enjoy the state of an emperor."

"Ah!" sighed Sir Batty, with a languishing glance at Clarendra, "why have I not this old man's fortune?"

"Would you take his years to command it?" Clarendra asked sadly, as her gaze lingered fondly on the attractions of Sir Batty's person.

"Surely I would," responded Sir Batty ardently, "if those years brought me the privilege that they give him. For I truly believe that if I were permitted to call you mine the joy would warm my wintry blood to the fervours of spring."

Poor Clarendra found herself very devoutly hoping that no such miracle would take place in the case of my lord of Godalming, but she said nothing of her thoughts, though a little involuntary shiver served to express them.

"Here am I," urged Sir Batty, "surely a most unhappy man. If I were even possessed of moderate wealth I should make bold to suggest an union that now I dare not hint at. A man and woman might be happy together on a little means, but surely not on practically nothing."

Unfortunately Clarendra was obliged to admit to herself that she was quite in agreement with Sir Batty in this regard. She had come to court in the very earnest hope of making a good comfortable match that would ensure her a life of ease and pleasure and freedom from the domestic cares that had troubled her youth. She had resolved to do her best to bring about such a result. But she had never, for a single instant, dreamed of such a fabulous chance as fortune had now been pleased to fling at her feet.

"Alas!" she confessed, "I fear me that I should never be happy as a poor man's wife, nor, as a consequence, make the poor man happy. I have had too much privation in the past to relish it in the present or to persevere in it through the future. I want to live a golden life."

"Such is indeed the only fit life for one so lovely as yourself," Sir Batty assured her. "You should command all the lustre that costly jewels and splendid apparel can bring to enhance your charms. For such an one as you the best of everything is no more than a necessity, and it would be merely sinful for any man, however ardent, to allow an unhappy passion to tempt you to poverty and squalor."

Clarenda wished she did not accord with him so completely; perhaps in the core of her heart she wished a little, too, that handsome Sir Batty was not quite so reasonable and judicious in his concern for her welfare. Sir Batty's cunning may have guessed something of her thought, for he spoke again on a shifted key.

"If I were but to consider my own feelings," he went on, "I should cheerfully resign all things, cheerfully welcome want and lowliness in the company of the object of my adoration. But should I not deserve a thousand deaths for condemning that adored object to those pangs? How could a true man have the heart to behold without reproach his idol in homespun, his beloved hungered and athirst, sleeping on a hard couch beneath a wretched roof? How could he, I ask you, how could he?"

Clarenda in her mind agreed that the lover Sir Batty pictured ought not to do anything of the kind if such an one as herself were the nymph of his dreams.

"After all," reflected Sir Batty, "perhaps the good gentleman's years are so many points to his credit. He may have the grace to be brisk in making you an exquisite widow."

It cannot be denied that some such fancy had indeed occurred to Clarenda, but she had frowned upon herself for it and reproved herself, wherefore she was now very ready to frown upon Sir Batty and to reprove him, although without making any confession of complicity in idea, a confession which she decided to be superfluous.

"For shame," she declared hotly. "You must not think such thoughts, or if you do think them you must not turn them into words to the shocking of my ears."

Sir Batty stooped and kissed her hand. "You are always in the right," he murmured. When he raised his head he could see that she was vexed no longer, and perhaps an unwarier suitor would have thought it the time to seek to shift his lips from her hand to her mouth. But Sir Batty was too skilful a tactician to hazard a false move in such an hysterical hour. He had hopes for himself in that future hinted at when a beautiful rich widow might be willing to accept him in second spousals, but he had also

hopes and plans for earlier favours, and to gain these he was wise enough to know that he must work craftily.

It was at this moment that a page entered the gallery wearing the Godalming livery. At the sound of his approach the pair, who had been seated in somewhat unnecessary proximity, moved a little apart. As soon as the page caught sight of them he advanced, and withdrawing a folded and sealed paper from his belt, presented it to Clarenda with a respectful salutation.

"From my lord of Godalming," he said. Clarenda handled the document nervously. It was addressed in a stately hand of write "To Mistress Clarenda Constant, these," and the big red seal with the Godalming arms upon it looked very solemn. Seeing that the page still waited, Clarenda questioned:

"Am I to read this now?"

The page bowed affirmation. Clarenda broke the seal, unfolded the paper and read:

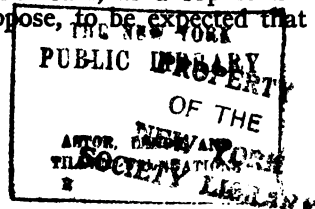
"The Earl of Godalming tenders his salutations to Mistress Clarenda Constant and makes bold to assure her that he has the Queen's permission to solicit an interview. He will therefore, with Mistress Constant's approval, do himself the honour of waiting upon her at two of the clock of this afternoon in the Hall of the Nymphs."

Clarenda looked up from her reading with an anxious, fluttered face. Sir Batty, with the air of one that is careful to avoid any show of indiscretion, had risen and walked some few paces to a window through which he looked thoughtfully.

"Will you tell my lord," Clarenda said, with a very unsuccessful attempt not to appear embarrassed, "that I shall do myself the honour to obey his commands."

The page, who carried a face of a careful blankness, as if he knew nothing at all of what everybody was talking about, bowed again and left the gallery. Sir Batty quitted his window and returning to Clarenda reached out his hands as if to take the paper from her. But Clarenda, as if she did not notice his movement, put the letter into the bosom of her dress.

"My lord wishes to see me," she said, as a sop to Sir Batty's curiosity. "It was, I suppose, to be expected that



he should do so. And now I must return to my duties."

Sir Batty gave her a glance in which ardour and devotion were beautifully blended.

"This shall not meddle with our friendship," he murmured.

"I suppose not," Clarendra answered, with a puzzled face.

"Here again, then, to-morrow," Sir Batty suggested, with a world of worship in his appeal.

"I suppose so," Clarendra answered again, still wearing the puzzled look. It really was a very bewildering, unchancy business. And with that answer Sir Batty had perforce to be content as he watched Clarendra speeding swiftly down the gallery.

My lord of Godalming's page found his master seated in his study busily reading certain reports that had come in from various sea-captains in foreign parts, and had been sent to him for his consideration by the Lord High Admiral. He laid down the paper he was reading—a paper which told an important tale well and was signed "Hercules Flood"—to listen gravely as the boy delivered Clarendra's answer. He listened with equal gravity as the youth explained his delay by his difficulty in finding Mistress Clarendra, whom he finally discovered in the Gilded Gallery in company with Sir Batty Sellars. Then with a gesture he dismissed the page and returned, with an unmoved countenance, to the report of Hercules Flood, Sea-Captain.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE HALL OF THE NYMPHS

THE Hall of the Nymphs was, as it were, the withdrawing-room or bower of the young ladies who were privileged to serve as maids of honour to the maiden Queen. It was so called because it was hung with tapestries representing the virgin goddess Diana and her fair attendants in various scenes of sport and chase. It was the room in which the penanced sisterhood had sat and studied Augustine while the maiden Queen informed Clarendia of the glory which was about to flow upon her.

This room was generally tenanted by several of the Queen's ladies, but this afternoon by the Queen's special orders it was placed at the sole disposal of Mistress Clarendia Constant, and Jock Holiday had the royal orders to see that none profaned its quiet save only Clarendia and the visitor whom she waited there to receive. That visitor was of course my lord of Godalming.

It was inevitably, from its nature, a curious meeting. The girl was a very rose-bush of embarrassments. My lord was as composed and polite as if he were opening a state ball or a diplomatic congress. The girl had been sitting in a window when my lord was announced. She rose with a start at his entry, dropping the book she had been pretending to read, and the fan she had been pretending to wield. My lord, stooping with no show of unease, picked up the discarded trifles and placed them on the window-seat. Then he extended a fine white hand, took prisoner the tips of the girl's pink fingers and with distinguished formality conducted her to a seat. When she was seated he asked her permission to do the like, and as soon as she had stammered assent he placed himself upon a chair a little way from her in an attitude of dignified repose and fixed his eyes, which still were bright and piercing, for a few seconds thoughtfully upon the flushed

loveliness of her face. There was nothing in his regard that was other than gentle and kind, and the girl in spite of her confusion found to her relief that she could endure it without distress, and even, after a little, diffidently return it.

My lord soon broke a silence which if prolonged must needs have been discomfoting to his companion.

"My dear young lady," he began, "I have done myself the honour to wait upon you thus promptly because I think it is well that we should come to a mutual and I trust not disagreeable understanding."

He paused for a moment, not as if expecting a reply but as if desirous that the purport of his exordium should sink into her heart.

Clarenda said nothing, but she smiled her thanks, and my lord with a bow resumed his speech.

"If it may seem that I have been consulting my own happiness in tendering my name to you, I would have you to believe that I have not in so doing been indifferent to your happiness or heedless of your feelings. I am as conscious as another of the disparity in our years, but it has not been without mature consideration that I have come to the conclusion that such a disparity need not of necessity prove a barrier either to your happiness or to mine."

Speaking as he did in that sweet clear voice, with that sweet smile on his face and kindness shining in his clear eyes the girl had it in her heart to wish that the fountain of youth bubbled somewhere in the Queen's garden.

"You are very good, my lord," Clarenda faltered, "and indeed I am at a loss what to say to you."

"If you will listen to me I would have you say this," continued my lord gently. "I would have you say, 'My lord, this offer of yours has taken me unawares, and I am the more dismayed by it as I am well aware that it is scarcely possible for me to run counter to the interest of my family and the wishes of my Queen. But I cannot say that I am rejoiced!' Come, young lady, is not this very much in substance what you would choose to say if you spoke your mind?"

Clarenda looked at him quickly and as quickly looked away again.

"I suppose it is," she whispered, and wished she could be more eloquent.

My lord nodded his head slightly.

"That is very natural on your part," he said. "On my part it is only natural that I should admire you, and that I should wish you well. But I should like you to understand that it is no part of my desire to act against your will. The Queen's approval I have gained, the consent of your kindred I make so bold as to take for granted. I should be glad to gain yours."

The girl moved a little as if she were about to speak, but he lifted a hand and checked her.

"Here and now," he declared, "I do not seek for an answer. The time for that answer from you is not yet. When the time comes, and all I ask is that I shall be left to judge of its coming, then, I assure you, you shall be free to act in accordance with the dictates of your heart. But I must in my regard for you point out that since I have asked for your hand with the consent of her Majesty and to the advantage of your family, it would place you in a position of discomfort if you were to go against the Queen's wish and refuse what in the eyes of the world must be, as far as name and fortune are concerned, a very admirable alliance. Do you follow what I say and do you agree with it? You need not answer. Just nod your head."

Clarenda had followed what he said with great directness and she did not see her way to disagree with it. What would become of her if she, the poor daughter of a poor house, were to fling away such a chance as this? What would her needy family, hungry for the sweets of life, say to her if she failed their need and flung away such fortune? She, too, was hungry for the sweets of life and my lord could pour them into her lap with full hands. Also in the natural order of things she might look forward to a not distant freedom.

Therefore Clarenda nodded her head, and my lord, seeing the signal, took up the thread of his tale.

"You and I therefore are agreed together, dear mistress, that our affairs shall stand for the present even as they stand. You shall be known to the world as my affianced

bride, but as far as you and I are concerned there will be no date fixed for espousals. That is for hereafter."

He paused, and the girl again nodded her head. She was very pale now, but the most of her embarrassment had fallen from her. From the last of it she was soon to be delivered.

"To save you any measure of hesitation," my lord resumed, "let me assure you, of what I hope truly needs no assurance, that I shall in no particular presume upon the relationship into which we are brought."

She flamed very lively now, but her eyes showed her appreciation and her gratitude. Surely never could age pay its addresses to youth with a more seemly carriage.

"You are very good to me, my lord," she fluttered.

"That is my desire," my lord said gravely. "But as you have agreed to enter into this alliance with my house there are certain conditions I should wish to suggest, or rather certain requests which I should desire to make."

Clarenda, very much overpowered by the situation, by her sudden exaltation, and by the suave gravity of my lord's manner, spoke with a quaver in her voice.

"Your lordship," she declared, "has but to command and you will find me most ready to obey your behests."

My lord of Godalming smiled a kindly smile that flowed and faded over his wrinkled face like a flash of wintry sunshine.

"It is very gracious of you to say as much," he assured her. "Well, in the first instance I want you to quit the Court for a while."

Clarenda's face fell and her eyes dimmed.

"Quit the Court," she echoed in a lost little shred of a voice that touched the heart of my lord with a curious sense of pity. But it did not change his purpose.

"I want you to quit the Court," he repeated. He also added after a pause the qualifying words that he had used before, "for a while." Again he paused, and sat looking at her steadfastly and the queer fancy came into her head that his gaze, so sharpened and intensified by long years of wisdom and experience of men and women, could read every thought of her mind.

"You will forgive me," he said presently, "if I presume

to suggest that it would scarcely be possible for one so young as you and so raw to the great world to be in all ways ripe for such an alliance as is now proposed to you. In birth as in beauty you are indeed worthy, but there are so many things to learn, small things indeed, but essential to your state, which have not yet been learned and which are not best to be learned in the environment of a Court."

He paused again, watching her with a glance in which a gentle humour blended with a very decided authority. Clarendo felt that there was no course open to her but to agree to whatever my lord might propose, though she did not very clearly understand what he would be at.

"I am your lordship's humble servant," the girl murmured, and said no more.

My lord took up her words in prompt protest.

"No, no, and again no. I may indeed make some suggestions that my experience may lead me to consider advisable, but the decision upon them shall rest with you. I wish for a time to sequester you in a place other than the Court and to place you under a care that the Court is not able to afford. But I wish you to remember that while you are in the place of which I speak and under the care to which I shall commit you, you are to consider yourself as under no control save such as you are willing to accept. If it please you to fall in with my proposals I shall be flattered. If it does not please you I shall still be content."

Clarendo stared at him in wonder, but she kept silent, for she was at a loss what to say. My lord continued:

"I beg you to remember first of all that while you are thus in obedience to my entreaty away from Court, you will have a free command of my fortune. You may spend money as you please, with both hands if you prefer it. I do not think my exchequer will feel the drain. Further, I wish you to consider yourself free, as free as any human being can be, to do exactly as you like and to consider yourself accountable to no one for your actions."

"To no one?" murmured Clarendo.

"To no one," my lord replied gravely.

He rose to his feet as a sign that the interview he had

solicited had come to an end and he was about to take his leave.

"That is all I have to say," he said, "and is all that you need to say, and I think that all is well said between us. May I be permitted the privilege to kiss your hand."

Clarenda had risen by this time. My lord of Godalming, stooping, took her hand again and this time lifting it to his lips impressed upon the pink finger tips the ghost of a kiss. Then he made her a profound salutation.

In another moment he was gone and Clarenda was alone in the chamber, free to resume her neglected book and her abandoned fan. She drew back again into the window-seat and took up both her playthings, but she did not open the book and she did not open the fan. Instead she sat there for quite a long time with her chin in her hand staring out into the sunlit garden, and wondering if she had dreamed a dream from which she would presently awake and laugh and wonder.

CHAPTER X

AT KING'S WELCOME

MY lord of Godalming had a mansion in the West Country that was little less than a palace and here he was resolved that Clarendon should dwell apart for a season. House was kept for him there by an elderly kinswoman, Lady Gylford, a faded gentlewoman whose gentility had flowered and flourished in the reign of the eighth Henry and now was as great as her estate was petty. If she had commanded as many domains as her coat showed quarterings she would have been well-to-do enough. But as it went she was church-mouse poor or would have been if it had not been for the kindness of my lord who set her up at King's Welcome hard by Plymouth town, and made her its majordomo. My lord now proposed to commit his betrothed to the care of this excellent woman, to be trained and paced in all those arts and graces that become a budding countess. At the same time he issued unqualified instructions to his vicereine that the liberty, the will, the whim of her young charge were to be in no way limited or fretted. The elder woman was permitted with tact and discretion, to offer advice to her charge, but the girl was to be left free to decide for herself whether she would follow the advice or no. In brief Mistress Clarendon was to be supreme sovereign of King's Welcome while she abode there.

Lady Gylford shook her grey head very soberly when she was made acquainted with my lord's intentions. It seemed to her as it seemed to most, the very top of folly for the old statesman to adventure the taking of a young wife. But that act of folly having to be accepted, it seemed pity of his life that he should add to it by giving to the young woman the ill-education of extravagant liberty and licence in caprice. Perhaps if Lady Gylford had been more foolish or more wise she would have ventured upon a

remonstrance to my lord. But time had taught her the lesson that it was well to assume that people knew their own minds, and that very certainly my lord in the course of his long career had shown that he knew his. So she dismissed the folly of man from her thoughts with a frown and a sigh and set herself to make ready for the reception of the visitor to King's Welcome. She only occupied a small corner of the great house, but now it was to be all thrown open as if according to its name it were welcoming royalty. So shutters were swung apart, air and light flooded into dusky halls and apartments, pictures renewed their acquaintance with the day, gold and silver plate was extracted from its treasure-chest and set upon long deserted sideboards, curtains and rugs and tapestries asserted themselves to make the great place gay.

It did not seem very gay to Clarendra for all that, when after her secret flitting from London she arrived at its gates. The mansion seemed old-fashioned, as indeed it was, and my lord's kinswoman seemed old-fashioned, as indeed she was, and the country life seemed dull. She had, she assured herself, known so much of the country life since her childhood on those Kentish acres where the Constants struggled to gain a livelihood, that she wished for no more of it, and lo, she was having more of it with a vengeance. She sighed greatly for the delights of the Court, she even sighed a little for the fearsome privilege of the Queen's intimacy; she sighed most for the fascinating companionship of Sir Batty. But since these were for the moment out of her reach, she resolved, having some measure of good sense in her composition, to make the best of her present condition, which at least was exceedingly magnificent.

As for Lady Gylford, that good lady soon began to pity herself for having been so unexpectedly called upon to play the part of duenna to a young lady who was a little bewildered and awestruck at first by the novelty of her position, but who, when once her thin veil of shyness was removed, was proving as teasing and capricious a charge as tranquil elderly lady could wish not to encounter.

Clarendra found that a small body of talent was arrayed before her for the purpose of carrying the outworks of her ignorance by storm and setting the banners of knowl-

edge on the battlements of her intelligence. There was Monsieur le Beau for instance that was ready to teach her the language of Ronsard with his lips, and the measure of French dances with his feet. There was Signor Bello Belli that would instruct her in Dante and Petrarch and the music of the lute. There was the honest English John Sturdy, Divine and scholar of Oxford, that was to attend to her religion and impart some tincture of Latin, a modicum of Greek, and some rudiments of mathematics, optics, and those other branches of scientific knowledge to which he was devoted. These were not indeed the real names of Clarendon's trine of teachers, but were the nick-names which she promptly bestowed upon them and by which she insisted on speaking of them, not indeed to their adoring faces but in the privacy of her conferences with Lady Gylford. Actually the name of the Frenchman was Monsieur Jean-Marie du Var; that of the Italian was Signor Giraldo Roccabini, and that of the Englishman the Reverend Elihu Sandys. But these their real names were scarce as apt to their natures as those with which the impudent wit of Clarendon had fitted them.

Clarendon did not very greatly enjoy that acquisition of knowledge which these good gentlemen were banded together to bring about, but since they were there and she must needs endure them, she contrived to make them afford her some unexpected entertainment. Even a less self-conscious maid than she could not fail to notice the impression that her youth and beauty made upon the varying softness of composition of each of her teachers, and the mischief lurking in her head prompted her to divert herself. It needed very little effort on her part to set two of the poor foolish pedagogues all on fire for her loveliness. Monsieur le Beau and Signor Bello Belli had not been very good friends to each other from the beginning, for each considered that his own particular subject was vastly more important to a politely trained young lady than that of his fellow. But in a very little while Clarendon contrived to set the pair completely by the ears. For each one being silly enough to fall in love with his fair pupil, was also silly enough to believe that the fair pupil encouraged him in particular, and let his, as he believed, less fortunate rival

understand as much, though all the time the impish young woman was making game of the brace of them.

It came in the end to an open brawl between the Frenchman and the Italian, who after hurling disdain and defiance at one another through the space of a summer afternoon, decided that nothing could satisfy their rage but the ordeal of battle. Hastily arming themselves with a brace of ancient swords from the armoury they prepared for a formal duel in the orchard. But Clarendon, who had engineered the whole quarrel, felt that this was going a little too far, so she appeared on the scene of strife in the company of Lady Gylford and with the assumption of a towering passion, gave her bellicose taskmasters such a talking-to that they were glad to slink away very crest-fallen, and restore their unblooded weapons to their hooks.

After this it was suggested by Lady Gylford that the Gaul and the Latin should take their leave of King's Welcome, a suggestion which Clarendon, who by this time was heartily sick of the admiring pair, cheerfully accepted. The Oxford scholar, who had shown greater command of his feelings and manifested a greater discretion in his carriage than his foreign competitors, was suffered to remain at his post. As he had some command of French and a smattering of Italian, he cheerfully consented to shoulder the duties of the exiles, after a very solemn warning from Lady Gylford to profit by their awful example, a warning which he promised most dutifully to regard.

It did not indeed seem on the face of it that he would have any great difficulty in keeping his word. Whatever his feelings towards Clarendon may have been he had managed to mask them with greater success than his more volatile colleagues, and he appeared quite content to let his young pupil take as much holiday and as little study as pleased her. Indeed he seemed too engrossed in his own pursuits to pay much heed to aught else. He had a small room to himself at King's Welcome where he was for ever busy, reading in abstruse books, and grinding and polishing small pieces of glass as if there were no other purpose in life worth serving. Wherefore Mistress Clarendon, following her humour, very cheerfully left him ample leisure to follow his humour, and Clarendon Constant was

mainly idle and Elihu Sandys was never idle. Yet if Clarendon Constant never gave Master Sandys a thought as she followed her caprices, it seems certain that he gave Mistress Clarendon many thoughts as he twiddled and fiddled with his little bits of glass.

CHAPTER XI

GONE—AND LEFT NO SIGN

IT would seem that the Court was destined to experience a succession of surprises. While it was still reeling under the staggering blow of the news of my lord of Godalming's betrothal and was at least promising itself an infinity of entertainment in studying the behaviour of the strangely-assorted pair in their courtly juxtaposition, came, like a second thunderclap, shock number two. Even as the earlier news had sped this way and that way through all the channels and purlieus of the Court that Lord Godalming was wishful to wed the twenty-year-old Clarendon Constant, so now the news sped that this same Clarendon Constant had vanished from the precincts of the Court and the purview of the courtiers. She had been visible to all eyes on the one day, that was yesterday. On the other day that was to-day she had disappeared as completely as if she had gone for a ride on the crupper of the Fairy King in the ballad.

If the Court at large, and especially that share of it which wore doublet and hose, felt a sense of loss on waking up to find that Mistress Clarendon Constant had quitted its company, that same sense of loss was most sharply felt by the Master of the Lesser Revels. He had anticipated a speedy marriage as the natural consequence of an impatient old gentleman's wooing, and he had counted with confidence upon a great deal of enjoyable time passed in the company of the young bride. It was clear to his philosophy that under the cover of her new name she would be more ready to grant those favours which it would now be so much safer to solicit. It was therefore exceedingly disappointing to find so promising a scheme marred at the start by the caprice of a meddling ancient.

The worst of the matter was that while every one knew

that Mistress Clarendra had gone from the Court, no one knew whither she had gone. She had vanished without a word of warning, without a syllable of farewell. Sir Batty's self-love was very grievously offended at such conduct on the part of one whom he had marked for his own.

Various casual conversations soon convinced Sir Batty that there were only three persons at Court who would be likely to have knowledge of Clarendra's whereabouts. The first of these three was the Queen. It was scarcely conceivable that one of her Majesty's Maids of Honour could be conveyed away from the royal side without her Majesty being cognisant of the fact and of the destination of the maid. But Sir Batty, though he knew that he stood pretty high in the Queen's favour, and believed in his heart that he might, Heaven propitious, oust the existing favourite, knew also that he would not stand high in the royal favour for very long if he asserted himself indiscreetly, and wearied the royal ears by too eager inquiries as to a departed young lady. The moments accorded by Gloriana for audience were intended to be spent in the rehearsing of Gloriana's praises, and Sir Batty felt sure that he would not be lightly forgiven if he ventured to depart from the routine of the courtly programme. So with a sigh Sir Batty reluctantly ruled the Fountain of Honour, who in this case was also the Fountain of Knowledge, out of his list and set himself to the consideration of the next person who was likely to be acquainted with the dwelling-place of the fair Clarendra. That person, obviously, was the fair Clarendra's affianced spouse, my lord of Godalming.

Now Sir Batty was more impudent than most men, but he was not impudent enough to affront my lord of Godalming with blunt inquiry as to the location of his future wife. My lord was one of the greatest nobles at Court, and Sir Batty, by the habit of his office, would have been reluctant to act, in the Court circle, in a manner unaccordant with the usages of courtly etiquette. To offend so great a man, if he could have made up his mind to do it, would be not merely to tempt but to demand the Queen's displeasure and might very well involve the loss of his Mastership, if no worse fate. Or again, my lord, who was known to be of extreme punctiliousness, on the point of honour,

might choose to keep the matter in his own hands and to answer Sir Batty's audacity with a challenge. And there would Sir Batty be, entangled in a broil from which there could be no escape with advantage to himself. For while he could not refuse to accept such a challenge, seeing that my lord was still famous for his swordsmanship, he would be scorned if he were to prove successful in the encounter and derided if he were defeated. With another heavy sigh Sir Batty struck the name of my lord of Godalming off the list of his possible oracles.

There was yet a third possibility and to it Sir Batty now gave his most careful consideration. This possibility was incarnated in the person of Jock Holiday. Sir Batty, who had the pliancy of a statesman where his own interests were concerned, had from the first observed the favour with which the Queen regarded Jock Holiday, and from the first, therefore, he had set himself to be civil to the rough Scotchman. Jock Holiday must know where Clarendon had gone. To Jock Holiday accordingly he went and engaged him in conversation.

"People say," observed Sir Batty carelessly, as one who discusses problems in the vague, "that there is nothing happens in Court, or for the matter of that in London either, with which you are not the first to be familiar."

"People say right," Jock answered, opening just enough of his wooden face to let out the three words and then closing it tightly again.

"And yet," continued Sir Batty, still abstractedly, "there must be some things which escape even the widespread and fine mesh of your knowledge."

Jock Holiday repaid the presumption of the Master of the Lesser Revels with a stony stare, but did not condescend to articulate protest.

"I suppose, for instance," Sir Batty went on, still with the same air of heedless detachment, "that you are not aware of the whereabouts of Mistress Clarendon Constant at this present."

This provocation forced Holiday to open the box of his face again and shake out another three words.

"You suppose wrong," he said dourly, and shut himself tightly up again. But Sir Batty was not to be warned off.

"How so," he cried; "is it really true, Jock, that you know everything? a claim which I thought no man dared to make save only my lord Bacon."

"My lord Bacon may know what he pleases," said Holiday sententiously. "I know what I know."

"I wish with all my heart," said Sir Batty, with a great air of simple candour, "that if you know where Mistress Clarendon now lodges you would share the knowledge with me."

"Knowledge shared is knowledge wasted, more often than not," Jock commented, "and what business may you have to be seeking where the young lady bides?"

"Why," replied Sir Batty, lying briskly, "I have been at the pains to write her a little ode on her coming espousals and should be glad to deliver it."

"If you will give it to me," Jock responded, "I will make sure that it is delivered."

Sir Batty looked at Jock with an angry amusement. He knew that he would waste time in attempting to bully or bribe the fellow, but he was not sure that it might be out of the possibilities to wheedle.

"Jock," he said gravely, "it would be a great happiness to me to know the whereabouts of Mistress Clarendon."

Holiday looked at Sir Batty with something almost like the illumination of jocoseness on his stolid countenance. He had a kind of respect for Sir Beatty, which was perhaps as far as Jock Holiday was likely to go in the matter of human affections.

"I misdoubt me," he said slowly, "if it would be as great a happiness for my lord of Godalming if you were possessed of the knowledge which you seek."

"Oh, Jock Holiday," cried Sir Batty, with a fine note of candid reproach in his voice; "since when are you on the side of age against youth?"

Jock Holiday could very well have answered, "Since I entered the Queen's service," but if he thought such a thought he said no such a say.

"Sir Batty," he said, "I am not for one side nor for another save as far as one side has more justice than the other. If we serve justice we cannot go far afield."

"And is it justice, I ask you?" queried Sir Batty petu-

lantly, "that my lord should carry off the loveliest maid from Court, for all the world as Pluto carried off Proserpina, and conceal her in unknown darkness?"

There was a quality in Sir Batty's voice when he sought to please that had its lure for the roughest of men as well as for the softest of women. Even dour Jock Holiday felt the spell.

"If I were a young gallant in your place," he said slowly, "and I were wishful to know where my sweetheart was hidden, I would not go asking questions of this man and that, but I would set my wits to work."

"How so, Jock?" questioned Sir Batty, with a real show of interest in the man's words.

"Why, I would try to put myself in the old carl's place, and I would ask myself in which of all his jewel-boxes the old carl would be most likely to hide so bonny a gem as this young lady you fancy, and then I would go and see for myself if I had guessed right or if I had guessed wrong."

And this was the most and the best that Sir Batty, for all his affability, could wheedle from Jock Holiday, who thereafter became mute as a fish on the subject of my lord of Godalming's affairs.

Sir Batty felt like a man who has lost his bearings in a maze, who strays in a labyrinth without a clue, who pores over a cypher he cannot read.

My lord of Godalming was known to all the world as a man of great possessions, but the exact range of those possessions was the knowledge of but a limited few, which hardly extended beyond my lord himself and my lord's lawyers and my lord's bailiff. There was Godalming House, my lord's ancestral home; there was Pepper-Farning which had come to him through family alliance with the Trimbulls; there was Long Loxley; there were, perhaps, half a dozen others, with the names of which most persons who busied themselves about the welfare of the great were familiar. Sir Batty asked himself anxiously if any of these ancient and famous estates would be the spot he would choose if he were a seventy-year-old earl betrothed to a twenty-year-old maid, to hide his desirable consort in. Very emphatically he shook his handsome head over each stately

mansion in turn. He could, of course, try each of them, but he knew beforehand that his search would be fruitless. If my lord was wary enough to whisk his coming bride so secretly from Court, it would never be to transfer her to some spot so easy of access as any one of these stately and conspicuous dwelling-places.

It was clear that Sir Batty had to look elsewhere, but he did not know which way to look, and he felt like a man in a fog. And then, all of a sudden, fortune favoured him. He got into talk with an aged gentleman, one Lord Ambleham, that came but rarely to Court and lived for the most part on his own estate at Finchley, where he was devoting the evening of his days to a work on English Heraldry. To this old nobleman, Sir Batty, hoping against hope, presented, by way of a feeler, the name of Lord Godalming and the story of the fantastic Court romance. All the genealogist in the old nobleman was fired by the tale.

"Save for the disparity of years," he pronounced, "which is great, and for the disparity of fortune, which is greater, this surprising business is not to be considered as a *mésalliance*. The house of Godalming is a great house, but the family of Constant is truly every whit as good in a herald's eyes. Why a Constant carried two blue lions of silver at Agincourt before ever the Godalmings showed a device to their name."

Sir Batty was not greatly interested in all this heraldic talk. Like every accomplished gentleman of the mode, he could trick a shield with precision and he was sufficiently acquainted with the blazonry of his own house. But for the moment his thoughts were too amorous for such erudition, and if he had not been a person of importance at Court who knew the necessity of paying proper respect to an ancient gentleman, he would have yawned in the speaker's face. If he had by any possibility committed such a breach of decorum he would have repented of it and delayed it half way to its consummation while he listened with gaping jaws, to the conclusion of the old scholar's remarks.

"It would be an odd thing," Lord Ambleham was saying, "if after so many generations a Constant should again be connected with King's Welcome that was theirs in days

when no man ever dreamed that it would become one of the manors of the Fawleys."

Sir Batty pricked up his ears. This was the first he had heard of a manor house in the Godalming hands that went by the name of King's Welcome.

"Where and what is King's Welcome?" he questioned with an air of indifference that he did not feel.

"Why," made answer Lord Ambleham, "King's Welcome is a manor house in Devonshire, by Plymouth town. The elder branch of the Constants were West Country folk in those days—I am speaking of the days of Richard Third—and they had a steward named Fawley, who espoused the cause of Henry Tudor while the Constants, both of Devon and Kent, stood by Dickon. That is how King's Welcome fell into the Fawley fingers."

Sir Batty was very polite to the old lord during the remainder of their conversation, which he artfully directed into channels unconnected with the Fawleys and the Constants. But he parted from company with Lord Ambleham in a very contented, hopeful mood.

CHAPTER XII

A TRIP INTO THE COUNTRY

JACK," said Sir Batty, in an affectionate tone and resting his hand affectionately upon his companion's shoulder, "your poor friend is ill."

Mr. Willoughby, staring in some surprise at the smoothness and ruddiness of his friend's countenance, declared roundly that he should never have thought it.

"Yet it is so, and so it is," persisted Sir Batty. "I am ill, very ill. I am grown sick all of a sudden of this Court air and yearn to breathe a cleaner element."

Mr. Willoughby looked again at his friend, relative, patron, as if he were tempted to inquire what the devil he would be at. Mr. Willoughby had a great admiration, even a veneration, for the Master of the Lesser Revels, but he frankly admitted to himself that he did not always understand him.

"I want change of air," continued Sir Batty. "I want change of scene. I have a pastoral spirit upon me, and long for the companionship of sheep. Oh, Jack, you cannot believe how hotly I long for the companionship of sheep."

It was early in the day when this dialogue took place. Also Mr. Willoughby was aware that his illustrious kinsman had as seasoned a head for wine as any man at Court. Otherwise Mr. Willoughby would have been tempted to infer that his illustrious kinsman was in liquor.

"No, Jack," pursued Sir Batty, reading astonishment in his honest friend's face; "I am not drunk, and also I am not mad. But I have a passion for the country that has suddenly come upon me, and you know that I am always a slave to my passions."

As a matter of fact Mr. Willoughby, in his somewhat obtuse way, was under the impression that his friend at Court could control his passions very well and guide them

for his own purpose with a sure and cool hand. But he did not think it necessary to say so, and having nothing else in particular to say, kept silent.

"Yes," persisted Sir Batty, "I must get me into the country. I must feast my eyes on green fields and entertain my ears with purling streams and rills. I am not exactly sure what purling may be, but 'tis a term all fine poets use—indeed, I have used it myself—and so I must immediately be provided with purling rills."

Mr. Willoughby suggested Hampstead. Sir Batty sneered. Mr. Willoughby suggested Tunbridge. Sir Batty laughed disdainfully.

"Why, my dear friend," he cried in a blaze of protestation, "you advise me as if I were some flat-capped cit, some alderman or shop-keeper that wishes for a change from his stinking booths and alleys. I want to go far afield, to wander in the wilds, like Amadis." He dropped all of a sudden his coxcombical manner, and it was in a plain and natural voice that he put a question, "You have a house by Tavistock, as I believe, Jack?"

Mr. Willoughby began now to have some idea of what his friend would be at. He certainly had a house by Tavistock and he admitted the fact somewhat reluctantly, for he feared what was coming next. And it came.

"I have a mind to ask you a favour, Jack," Sir Batty began again, with his most charming smile. "Or rather, if you were to ask me to pay you a visit at your house by Tavistock I vow and protest that, for your dear sake, I should not refuse you."

Mr. Willoughby listened somewhat ruefully to this suggestion. He was very glad to be in London and to move in the fringes of the Court, and to believe that he was converting himself from a country bumpkin into an accomplished cavalier. Wherefore he did not at all desire to return to his sleepy seat of Willoughby Homing near Tavistock, which he hoped he had said good-bye to for many a long day. But he could not afford to disoblige Sir Batty, to whom he owed so much for masterly instruction in the arts of gaming, drinking, drabbing, and the other accomplishments that go to the making of your perfect rake. Also, as he reflected, if he did not do as Sir Batty wished

he knew Sir Batty well enough to know that if he had made up his mind to go into the country, into the country he would go, and there would he, poor Jack Willoughby, be left stranded in town without his mentor, his patron, to act as his sponsor in polite society.

"Why, surely," he said, with a desperate attempt at cheerfulness, which Sir Batty noted with much secret entertainment, "I should be happy indeed to welcome you to my poor house, though I promise you, upon my honour, that you will find it grievously dull."

He would have liked to add that he too would find it grievously dull, but refrained, fearing that to do so would seem inhospitable.

"By no means," Sir Batty assured him. "By no means. I am never dull in your company, my dear Jack, and lest you should by any chance feel that you might find a dullness in mine I have very little doubt that you could persuade our mutual friend, Spencer Winwood, to make one in our little pastoral party."

Sir Batty had no doubt about the matter because he had already settled it at all points with Spencer Winwood. That gentleman was quite agreeable to the proposition to spend a certain number of secluded days in Mr. Willoughby's company at Mr. Willoughby's country seat, that he might, at his ease, and at his host's expense, occupy himself in plucking him. Mr. Willoughby, who did not know this, accepted the suggestion readily enough. It would be, he felt, no small distinction to such a countryman as himself to entertain two such fine town birds as Sir Batty and Mr. Winwood.

"Then that's all settled," said Sir Batty pleasantly, "and the sooner we set out upon our little jaunt the better I shall be pleased. Upon my honour, Jack, you have no idea of what a good turn you are doing me. A little more, only a little more, and I solemnly asseverate that I should have died of suffocation, stifled by the vile fumes of this intolerable city."

CHAPTER XIII

A COACH AND FOUR

IT was not a way with Clarendra to indulge ever in much self-communion or to cogitate profoundly on the course of her fortunes. So long as things went pleasantly with her she was content to be pleased and to leave reflection and meditation on one side. Of course even the flightiest of maidens must sometimes give a passing thought to her situation, when it happens to be so odd a situation as that of Clarendra, but Clarendra did no more than she could help in this regard. It seemed to be settled that she was to marry my lord Godalming, and the marriage meant great worldly advantage to her and her family, and she let her fancy linger as little as possible upon the knowledge that Lord Godalming was over seventy years of age. This she could do the more easily because he was not by to remind her of the fact or to force her into unwelcome reflection upon the discomforts, to say no more, that must needs arise from a union between two persons with such a disparity of years. After all, until the mooted marriage was a nearer matter it was not worth while to dwell too insistently upon its obvious disadvantages. The wiser course was to make the most and the best of her fortune in being chosen for so exalted a position as that of Countess of Godalming.

It may be that after a time Mistress Clarendra found the grandeur of King's Welcome a little too grandiose for her levity and caprice. At the beginning she felt the natural sense of exultation that a poor girl must feel who finds herself as if by magic in command of a great country house and a legion of servitors. But when the novelty had begun to tarnish, when she had invaded every room and stared at every picture, when she had paced every terrace, raced over every lawn and penetrated every glade, she began to think that she knew King's Welcome pretty much

by heart and that though King's Welcome was of excellence in its way it was not altogether her way. It was really too big for her vivacity to feel at ease in. She wanted something brighter and livelier as a background to her disports; she likened herself to a humming-bird in a cage of steel. Then she remembered that though she was not free to return to London until my lord gave the signal, she was free to wander at her will within the limits of the West Country. Being a country girl she was a good walker and a good rider, but now the fancy took her that she would like to ride in a coach and four.

She did not feel sufficient confidence in her empire over King's Welcome to command a coach without consultation with my lord. So a letter was written setting forth this desire of Clenda's and addressed to my lord in London and entrusted to a courier who was bidden to ride as if he rode on affairs of state. And so he did ride through fair and foul, over rough and smooth, till he changed his last post and stood in the presence of my lord of Godalming. My lord read the letter and straightway seating himself at his desk he brushed aside an armful of state papers and wrote an instant reply to his betrothed. This he delivered to the courier, bidding him return with the utmost speed, till he gave the letter into the lady's hands. And once again the courier galloped over rough and smooth, through fair and foul, until he sighted the towers of King's Welcome, and without heeding his dust and sweat delivered his letter to an impatient lady who had been counting the hours to his return. Clenda dismissed the courier with a smile of thanks, and then all in a hurry and a flurry she broke the seal, opened the paper, and in a twitter of excitement read what my lord had to say.

"My dear child," thus the letter began, "I have to thank you for the honour you have done me in writing to me, an honour which I feel none the less greatly because, it was unnecessary save in so far as it satisfied your own gracious spirit, and because it was, in so far as it concerns me, wholly undeserved. Let me assure you, once and for all, that so long as our present relations persevere you are absolute mistress of King's Welcome and of any use to

which you may please to put such poor fortune as I command. I am happy in the command of it so long as it can serve to give you pleasure, for I have always held that wealth is in itself but a mean thing and little to be rejoiced over unless it is employed in some worthy usage. And what usage can be more worthy than to give satisfaction to a lady whom I esteem so dearly and whose servant I am proud to subscribe myself. Act in all things according to the summons of your judgment and assure yourself once again—if further assurance be needed between you and me—that whatever you may choose to do, even in far greater matters than the setting up of a coach, will always have the approval of your humble and faithful servant ever,

•
"GODALMING."

It might have done my lord good if he could have witnessed the delight of the maid as she read this most amiable of epistles. She sang, she jigged, she skipped, she floated around the room clapping her hands like a child in a whirl of delight. It was not merely satisfaction at the promise of her coveted toy, her golden coach, though that same satisfaction was a very warm feeling indeed. It was the formal confirmation, in words like milk and honey, of my lord's gracious assurances to her before she set out from London. With the readily quickened doubts of the young in the flowing assurances of their elders the girl had been tempted to discount very liberally the fair protestations of my lord. But now here they were, renewed and confirmed under his own hand and seal and the whole done in such terms of compliment and courtesy as seemed to perfume the paper they covered. My lord now seemed to her like some fairy godfather in a fairy tale. She had often heard of fairy godmothers but never of a fairy godfather and she liked the appellation, for her fairy godfather certainly had the powers attributed to fairy relatives of whatever degree, of conferring inestimable gifts and privileges upon their favourites.

Instantly Plymouth coach-builders were set going and in the fulness of time Clarendon's coach came into being. It certainly was a very magnificent vehicle. It was so profusely gilded that it might very well be taken at first glance

as fashioned of the precious metal itself and it was only after the first glance had done winking and got used to the brilliance that the substance after all proved to be no more than honest English wood. Inside there were the most luxurious seats and cushions that ease could wish or skill devise, all upholstered in the choicest brocades and velvets, and all the metal fittings were of silver-gilt, exquisitely wrought. The under roof of the coach—its ceiling as it were—was painted with a world of chubby little Loves that seemed to be hurling themselves through a canopy of delicately tinted clouds that they might pelt the fair occupant of the coach with roses, of which odorous ammunition they carried abundance in their plump arms. Clarendon laughed till she cried and cried till she laughed at the first sight of her splendid equipage, with its four noble dapples and its great coachman on his hammercloth as solemn and globular as Humpty Dumpty on his wall. "In such a coach and four," she cried to her patient elder, moved herself to smiles by the girl's delight, "in such a coach and four I could drive into fairyland."

CHAPTER XIV

LOVE IN A WOOD

HERCULES and Philemon descended the stairs and issued into the sweet air. They made almost as marked a contrast, where they walked side by side, as Hercules and his shipmate had afforded on the deck of *The Golden Hart*. For Philemon was slender and pale with delicacy in his face and fragility in his form, and the beauty of his face was often shadowed by an expression of dejection. As he walked, the limp with which he had been born was sufficiently notable though the young man took great pains to dissimulate it as much as possible. Hercules, remembering the infirmity, strolled at a leisurely pace to lessen the inconvenience to his friend, and the pair walked along the Hoe conversing blithely.

The day was fair enough and fine enough of itself to justify blitheness. It was one of those days when late spring seems to recover with an effort the rapture of its youth with the pallor of its skies, the clarity of its air, the pungency of its odours and the tingling influences of the waking year. "This might be an April morning," Philemon said as the pair strode out into its cool blues and lucid golds and surveyed a world that looked as if it had just washed its face. "It is a good morning to welcome a home-comer."

"One of the joys of home-coming is to find that the place one loves has changed but little," said Hercules.

"I should not think that Plymouth was greatly given to change," Philemon commented.

"Nay now," protested Hercules, "you must not say we are sluggish in Plymouth. Here, where we walk, well nigh every house is a familiar friend whom I can salute as if it were a sentient being."

"Houses, like books, have their fates," murmured Philemon. Hercules pursued his reflections.

"There is the house of the tailor that built me my first pair of breeches. A son of his now rules the goose there. In yonder house with the yellow face that looks as if it were of a mind to topple into the street a girl lived whose beauty called to my dawning senses. There is the very window from which I first saw her lean out and look into the street and catch my admiring eye and shake her curls at me."

"What became of her?" questioned Philemon.

"Oh," replied Hercules, "she married the tailor's son, and now shows at other windows a buxom florid motherly face."

Philemon laid an arresting hand on his companion's arm.

"Here we are at the 'Dolphin,'" he said.

The "Dolphin" stood at the farther end of the Hoe, hard by the waterside. It was not a hostelry to which fashionable visitors from Exeter or London would resort. These would take up their quarters further inland at the house which called itself "The Royal Glory," and showed the face of Queen Elizabeth, amazingly flattered, with rays all round her head, like the conventional presentation of the sun. But all seafaring men that knew their business used the "Dolphin," loved the "Dolphin," swore by the "Dolphin." There was no other such comfortable tavern in the world, they would protest; no such vintages were stored in other cellars; no such ale, no such brandy could be swigged or sipped elsewhere. It was the latest place your last sea-captain would visit ere he scaled his vessel's side to sail over the vast ocean to his chosen quarter of the globe. It was the first place to which he would turn his deck-weary feet when he won his way home again.

It was nothing very wonderful to look at, sturdily built and well timbered and almost of a wine colour with age, as if the noble liquors it had stored and squandered in all its years had somehow oozed their way into brick and beam and mellowed both to a ruddy hue. Its outside certainly suggested comfort and seemed to promise hospitality, but nothing like such comfort and hospitality as the inside really afforded. Warm corridors, cosy bed-chambers, jovial par-

lours, all were to be found at the "Dolphin." It ran a great way back around its court and thus proved larger than its front implied, so that it could house if occasion required the company of an admiral's galley.

"I remember," said Hercules, as he and his friend halted in front of the building with its ancient faded sign, "the day when I was first taken hither by my uncle. He brought me into the parlour where the sea-captains congregated, and there he set me between his legs and treated me to my first sip of sack. It made me so drowsy, as I recall, that the talk around me grew as vaporous as a dream."

"I fear me that you found your way here easily enough thereafter," said Philemon with a faint smile.

"In good faith I did," said Hercules. "I became a sea-captain myself in the fulness of time and one of the 'Dolphin's' brotherhood. I have always found a welcome here."

"Let us see what welcome we find here to-day," said Philemon, and was making for the door when Hercules restrained him.

"No, lad, no," he said decisively. "Let us keep to our purpose. We have agreed to give the 'Dolphin' the go-by on this journey so let us stick to our agreement."

Philemon yielded with a sigh and a smile and the pair resumed their walk.

They were soon in the open country and diverged from the main road into a somewhat narrower path that followed a gentle slope and skirted a little wood which fringed it like the plumage on an Indian crest. As they ascended, enjoying the freshness of the morning, it pleased Hercules to expatiate upon the merits of the West Country.

"Where else," he asked, "is grass so green, where else are the hedges so sweet scented, where else are trees so noble, where else do the birds sing so lively in their choir?" Without giving Philemon time to answer he shouted aloud a "nowhere" in reply to these questions as they floated from his lips.

At that moment the pedestrians became aware of the sound of voices raised much aloud and high in anger. The noise the voices made sounded from their unseen arena in the thick of the coppice to be more like the clattering

of angry poultry or the squallings of Grimalkin than the utterances of human throats, but it was so noisy and so persistent that it aroused Hercules' curiosity and determined him to find out whence it came and what it meant.

He and Philemon, therefore, quitted the pathway and dipped into the twilight of the little wood whose floor was covered with a kind of moss-like grass that made a carpet for the feet as thick and soft as any velvet pile. As this made the going of the pair noiseless they could hear the screaming voices growing louder without themselves being heard, and as the clamour waxed they increased their pace to a swift trot which presently brought them to a stop as they discovered the cause of the vociferation.

The friends came to a halt on the edge of a hollow which was fringed around the lip with trees. On the flatter ground at the bottom of the hollow a couple of men were standing facing one another who were making the horrid sounds that had so startled the serenity of the woods. Each man had, with his left hand, taken a firm grip of the beard of the other, and each man was busily engaged with his right hand, either in endeavouring to belabour the crown or countenance of the other or to ward off blows delivered at his own crown or countenance. And while they acted thus, staggering hither and thither, tugging and thumping, the pair kept up an incessant ape-like chattering that was very strident and dislikeable.

Hercules, who had the rapid take-in of the seaman, comprehended the whole ridiculous situation at a swift survey. An open wallet on the slope, some hunches of bread and a flagon, suggested that the belligerents had been engaged upon the business of breaking their fast before they took to brawling. Their habit, which was of a plain comfortable fashion, showed them to be more simple than gentle. On the slope, by the discarded banquet, lay a canvas bag that seemed to conceal a lute and near it was a small leathern kit-case. From these two objects it was easy to infer that the quarrellers were musicians of some kind, though there was nothing musical in the shrieks with which they expressed their fury. Also it was easy to see that they were not habitually men of wrath, for though they swung their

disengaged arms lustily it was obvious that they were doing each other very little harm.

Hercules and Philemon watched them for a few seconds with an amused interest, while they, all unconscious of observation, continued to lug and pommel and jabber at the top of their compass. Then finding that the entertainment threatened to be monotonous, Hercules decided to intervene.

He was down the side of the slope and upon the struggling pair before either of them was aware of his presence. Philemon followed his friend at a more leisurely pace.

"Good sirs," Hercules cried, "why do you conduct yourselves in this unchristian fashion?"

The two disputants, startled by the sound of his voice, turned their heads in his direction, but neither abandoned his clutch of the other's beard and neither ceased to saw the air with his fighting hand. The only difference that Master Flood's intervention made was that they ceased to vituperate each other. Instead of their former shrillness they fell into a dead silence, which seemed somehow even a more ludicrous accompaniment to their struggles. Silent they stared at the stranger, and silent they continued their fisticuffs.

"Good sirs," said Hercules again, "pray suspend these strange hostilities and instruct me in the cause of your difference."

Then seeing that they paid him no heed and indeed from their rage or from some other cause they did not seem to understand him, Hercules caught each of the wranglers by the collar of his jerkin and so pulled them apart as easily as he would have shelled a peascod.

Keeping a firm grip on his prisoners, Hercules lowered himself to the earth and drawing the combatants with him, very much against their will, he seated himself comfortably upon the soft grass and plumped them down, with less regard for their comfort, beside him. Philemon, a little behind, followed Hercules' example in seating himself upon the slope, and with his hands clasped round his knees watched what followed.

As Hercules looked more closely into the swarthy countenances of the brawlers he realised that these were no Eng-

lishmen, but men of foreign blood and he understood why their squallings had seemed unfamiliar.

"Now, sirs," he said peremptorily, "have the goodness to tell me what fool's game you play here, and by what right you dare to insult God's own country with your antics?"

As neither of the belligerents still made him any answer, Hercules was inclined to frown until he discovered that he was holding the two men so tightly by the collars of their coats that his knuckles left them no breath to speak—not indeed that they could have had much breath to use after all they had wasted—and that they might only respond by gaping at him piteously. Hercules released his hold upon them and they both flopped forward upon the grass and lay there for a while, panting and gasping. It was very plain that they were not used to such encounters as Master Flood had just interrupted.

Hercules surveyed the sprawling pair with amusement and disapproval.

"Now, my merry friends," he said, "when you have garnered your winds I shall be pleased if you will deliver me the secret of your demeanour."

He addressed the pair in English, having as yet no means of guessing what their native speech might be, and in English, of a sort, one of the men, the longer and the leaner of the pair, answered him, but an English so broken and bemuddled that Hercules was fain to be free of it. So, as he guessed the man's nationality by this time, he addressed him in very fluent French delivered with an honest English accent.

"God save you," he said, "but I think you will make your story the clearer if you speak it in your own speech." He gave a jerk of his head to the other combatant. "Is your friend here a Frenchman?" he questioned.

The man thus indicated struggled to assume a sitting posture and as dignified a manner as he could command.

"Sono Italiano," he said solemnly.

"Oh, you are Italian," said Hercules, speaking a sort of seashore Italian as fluently as his French and with the same sturdy British utterance. He turned to the Frenchman and questioned him.

"Do you speak Italian?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"Why should I speak Italian," he said, "when the good God has permitted me to speak French?"

Hercules saw a glare in the Italian's eyes and felt that the question he was about to put was already answered. But he put it none the less. "Do you speak French?"

"I speak it a little," the Italian answered, grudgingly, "and I understand it quite well. It is the language of mountebanks but it is useful in travel."

As the Frenchman made a minatory movement which suggested his immediate intention of flying at the Italian's throat, Hercules lifted a warning hand, the mere sight of which was sufficient to restrain him without the added influence of its weight. Then he addressed him.

"Now," he said, "since we can all understand one another in French, tell me, without further delay, what you were doing here a-pulling of each other's beards?"

"We had quarrelled," said the Frenchman sourly, "that pig of Italy and I."

"Pig of Italy," echoed the Italian with a scream. "Frog of France, toad of France, flea of France, louse of France."

He was moving on his hands and knees, as he screamed, towards the Frenchman, who, on his side, was doing the like, with his mouth opened wide for the delivery of new injuries. But before they could come to grips again, Hercules had silenced both of them by clapping his palms across their gaping jaws and then, with no show of exertion, he extended his arms and laid the bellicose rivals flatlings on their backs. Philemon in the background laughed heartily.

"My friends," said Hercules gravely, as he dried his palms upon the grass, "I have but one word for you and that is 'pax,' which being interpreted signifies peace. I have asked our French friend here to tell me the history of this squabble or scuffle or whatsoever you may please to term it. When he has said his say, but not until he has said his say, you will be free to give your version of the business. And I advise each of you to carry himself dis-

creetly during the course of our little congress, for if he fail to do so it may possibly be the worse for him."

The foreigners seemed to be impressed alike by the force of Master Flood's speech and the strength of Master Flood's fingers, for when they had struggled anew to a sitting posture, they contented themselves with expressing their animosity by the shooting of angry glances across Master Flood's person. But they uttered no challenge and they lifted no finger in menace.

"Begin, Mounseer," said Hercules politely. "Tell me why you and the illustrissimo here were tweaking of one another's chins and boxing of one another's ears like a brace of apes."

"It was the old, old quarrel," said the Frenchman gravely, "and the old, old cause. It is possible that your honour may have heard tell of Helen of Troy."

Hercules knitted his forehead and raked among his memories.

"I remember her name," he said, "but I had it in my mind that she lived in Paris."

"Your honour has the gist of the matter," answered the Frenchman affably. "She was the most beautiful woman in the world while she lived."

"In Paris?" questioned Hercules.

"Or thereabouts," replied the Frenchman with discretion. "And all the men brawled about her beauty. And behold she has come to life again and all men brawl as before."

Hercules pricked up his ears.

"Who is this nonpareil you talk of?" he asked. "I have seen no such wonder in these parts since I came home from sea."

"I would do well not to tell you," the Frenchman replied sadly, "for if you were to see her, you would of necessity suffer as I have suffered and as that spawn of Italy yonder professes to have suffered."

"Professes!" yelled the Italian, "Ye Gods, professes. Why, you trash of France——"

Words seemed to fail the needs of his indignation and he was making to scramble to his feet again and fall upon his enemy. But the heavy hand of Hercules descended

upon his shoulder and he changed his mind and kept his place and the peace.

"I very devoutly hope and believe," said Hercules, "that if I were to encounter this amazing lady and were to find her as lovely as you assert and even lovelier I should make no such fool of myself as you have made, and your friend here."

"Friend!" ejaculated the Italian, "friend. He is no friend of mine. Only my only enemy. I could eat his liver in a pie."

"And I could eat your heart raw," retorted the Frenchman, shaking with fury, but making no movement under the warning of Hercules' uplifted finger.

"You are a queer brace of mountebanks," commented Hercules, surveying the quarrellers with considerable amusement. "Now what may your trade be?" This to the Gaul.

"I am a dancing master," said the Frenchman, with his hand to his breast, "very much at your service."

"I fear I shall have little need of you," said Hercules. "I can pass muster in a country dance and I can foot it in a seaman's jig as well as another, and so much must serve my turn." He turned to the Italian. "And you, sir, what may be your business in life?"

"I give instruction on the lute," the Italian answered, "and how to sing to it. And I also am very much at your service."

"I can sing a sailor's shanty," replied Hercules, "and I can pick at the strings with sufficient skill to make the noise for it, and that is enough for me at the present, so I will not trouble your ability. But I will tell you both, here and now, that I who am neither a dancing-master nor a lute-player, but have the honour to be a seafarer, am not made of such base metal as shall melt at the sight of a girl's face."

"You have not seen this girl's face," persisted the Frenchman.

"If you say that again," said Hercules, "I may have a mind to be vexed with you. And now deliver me your story plainly that I may know what to make of it."

Thereupon, with great volubility, the Frenchman began

a long, rambling and somewhat incoherent narrative, which was not rendered the more coherent by the frequent interruptions and emendations and additions of the Italian lute-player. But out of the whole imbroglio of speech, with its flowery phrases and its sighs and suspirations, Hercules managed to gather a certain handful of facts. It seemed that there was a young lady of great personal attractions who was living in a great house near Plymouth under the charge of an ancient lady of noble birth and reduced fortunes. This young lady was, it seemed, the daughter, or the niece, or the ward—neither the Frenchman nor the Italian was quite certain which, but, as Hercules observed, it did not matter—of a great noble of the Court of the great Queen. And this great noble, having wished that his daughter, or niece, or ward, should be as perfect in the arts of life as she was already perfect in physical gifts, had very naturally decided to give her the advantage of the instruction of the dancing-master and the lutanist there present. But the young lady was so lovely that no susceptible heart could resist her charms, no, nor even a savage one surely, for it must needs soften under her influence. Therefore the dancing-master and the lute-master fell victims to this siren and were pleased to consider themselves as rivals, and were for tasting one another's blood with unfamiliar weapons, and were incontinently bundled out of the great house for their pains.

Hercules listened to all this confused narrative with a great deal of amusement. When the dancing-master had made an end he questioned him.

"But since you were, as I gather, incontinently and definitely dismissed from the vicinity of this she-marvel, how comes it that I found you both brawling here just now and cuffing of one another's chops. The lady is out of your star and you cannot compete for her. It is as if two dogs should fight for the moon."

The dancing-master made an apologetic gesture with his hands.

"With your favour, sir, it is indeed true that we cannot compete for the lady. Yet because of her we still had cause for contest."

"What was your cause, in Heaven's name?" asked Hercu-

les, with as grave a countenance as he could compass. The dancing-master bowed again and explained.

"Why, I and that pig of Italy quitted our paradise together in seeming friendship on account of our common misfortune. But our show of friendship did not endure."

"I should think not, indeed," interpolated the lutanist and shook his fist at the dancing-master, who answered him with a ferocious scowl and continued his statement.

"Our disunion began when yonder malignant idiot presumed to assert that he suffered more from the loss of our lady's countenance than I did, thereby implying that his was a nature more finely attuned to high passion and of a more lively susceptibility to the pangs of love than mine. Wherefore I very naturally gave him the lie."

"And he gave you a cuff on the ear for your impudence," asserted the Italian.

"This assassin did indeed strike at me when I was off my guard," the Frenchman admitted, "for we were sitting at meat here upon the grass when the quarrel began. But I soon showed him what manner of man he had to reckon with."

"There was no need to show me," interrupted the lutanist, "for I knew already. A mangy cur."

Here the pair began bawling such terms of abuse at each other that Hercules was fairly deafened by the din. But a command for silence, thundered in such a voice as he would use in a sea-storm and backed by a round oath or two, soon brought quiet again.

"In my opinion you are a brace of donkeys," said Master Flood judicially. "In the first place because your imaginations distort a young lady, who I daresay is passably well-favoured, into an eighth wonder of the world, a tenth muse and a fourth grace. In the second place for being impertinent enough, not indeed to admire her for it is any man's privilege to admire a pretty woman, but to brawl about her and so make public your presumptions. In the third place for not making friends in your common misfortune, but instead brewing bad blood over a trifle."

"Trifle!" sighed the Frenchman.

"Trifle!" sneered the Italian.

"Trifle," insisted Hercules stoutly. "What is it but a

trifle between two beings that call themselves men, Heaven forgive them, whether one of them is more liable or more prompt to make an ass of himself than the other. For let me tell you, my friends, and you will do well to husband my words in your memories, that for a man to think over-much of women or to make over-much of them, is to prove himself indeed a jackass. Let him serve them always with honour, and love them, when he must, with sanity and discretion, but let him not deliver his honest soul into their keeping nor make himself a love-sick zany because they are fair and soft. Be advised, if you are wise; shake hands and forget the past, or if you cannot be so magnanimous, part company and so avoid the temptation of pulling one another by the beard, which is a practice unworthy of creditable men. For there is, to a sober judgment, no reason why because a man happens to be a dancer or a fiddler he should cease to be a decent fellow."

Hercules delivered this address, which was quite a long-winded utterance for him, in a very loud voice, and he looked very hard at the men while he was saying it.

His hearers did not appear to take his meaning very clearly. But they saw plainly that he was in earnest and that, on the whole, he meant them well, which was a matter for satisfaction with a man of his muscle. So the pair looked sheepishly at one another, not unwilling to take their new friend's advice, but neither liking to make the first advance. Hercules saw the hesitation and divined the cause.

"Come, come," he cried, "a little good-will and all is well. Here, give me each a hand."

The three were on their feet by this time and standing at the points of a triangle. Hercules held out a right hand to the Italian and a left hand to the Frenchman, each of whom readily enough surrendered a right hand to the Englishman's keeping.

"Now," said Hercules gravely, "you will be pleased to note, sirs, that I am moving both my hands at the same rate of progress to draw your two hands duly nearer to each other. Thus neither of you can accuse himself, or be accused by his fellow, of being the first to solicit reconciliation. Now I bring your two hands together and lay

them one upon the other, and I trust to see them clasped in sign of amity. Good."

The last ejaculation was extorted in approval of the obedience of the foreigners, who did now exchange a very handsome and hearty handshake which suggested that their enmity was buried.

"Be friends and keep friends if you can," said Hercules, by way of blessing to the ceremonial; "for friendship is a good thing and I warrant a better than this love-business you talk so much about. And now"—here Hercules slipped his hand into his breeches pocket—"if a broad piece or so would serve your turn for your journey, say the word and they are at your service."

Both the men protested that they stood in no need of such assistance, but they made it plain that they were grateful none the less for his kind intent. Then Master Flood wished them good-morning and turning on his heel joined Philemon, who had risen, and the two friends began to climb the slope. When they reached the summit, they paused and looked back. The late adversaries were busily engaged in packing their wallets. But they both looked up as Hercules and Philemon paused, and after exchanging a solemn clasp again, waved their hands to their peacemaker and his companion.

"Philemon," said Hercules, as the two friends continued their journey, "did you get ear of that matter between that pair of gabies?"

"I heard what they said, well enough," Philemon assented with a faint smile.

"And did you not marvel to discover that two corporate beings with souls in their bodies and having presumably sufficient business on earth to justify their existence, could prove such fools and noodles because some lass happens to carry a comely face?"

"Why, as to that," Philemon replied, while the smile faded into an expression of apology and appeal, "I am not so sure that I hold with you."

"Not so sure," echoed Hercules, and stared at his companion. "Why, lad, I know that you think highly of rhymes and sonnets in honour of ladies, but I would not believe you of like mind with those lunatics."

"Yet I must even confess as much," said Philemon, "if I surmise rightly that the maid of whom they spoke was the very maid whom I met one day on the moors, that same she of whom I made a trifling picture. If it were indeed she they could not extol her too highly."

Hercules looked at his friend with good-humoured compassion.

"Here is a deal of fuss about a pretty visnomy," he said. "So this maid can turn an English head as well as a French or an Italian."

"I would wager that she has turned many heads," said Philemon with a half-sigh, "and will turn many more before she tires of the pastime. I would not answer for your own headpiece, good master mariner, if you came within the ring of her witchery."

Hercules laughed again, but also he shook himself as if he were physically ridding himself of an oppression.

"Let us talk of something more sensible," he suggested. "Are we anywhere near to our goal?"

"In five minutes more," Philemon promised, "we shall be able to speak 'The Golden Hart.'"

CHAPTER XV

A GODDESS OUT OF A MACHINE

SOME little time after Hercules came into possession of his land-ship he was busy in his garden, as it was his joy to be. For he loved the smell of the brown earth no less dearly than he loved the smell of the green sea; and he loved the furrows that his own toil wrought along his flower-beds as much as he loved the dip of the rising and the falling wave; and he loved the starling as much as he loved the sea-mew. The sturdy muscles that were used to rope and hawser, oar and tiller, lent themselves with the readiness of strength and skill to the use of spade and rake, hoe and pitchfork. It was as good to dig the land as to plough the sea. The wind sang as sweetly over a Devon meadow as over the waste of waters; a man was as good a man on land as on sea if he had but a sound heart and a sound head and the fear of God in him.

Such was the simple philosophy under which Hercules lived and whistled and was content. He had grown so used to beating about the world here and there and everywhere, that the novelty of keeping in one place for days and weeks and maybe years tickled him vastly, and he had never space for an inch of regret in his mind for the Tortugas or the Indies while he surveyed the amazing land-ship in its little kingdom of Devonshire garden and orchard.

He was working in his shirt-sleeves, manuring a bed of roses, when his ear was taken by a nearing noise that sounded to his fancy like the grunting of a thousand pigs, or the chuckling of a thousand chanticleers. Being too busy to trouble his mind with trifles he went on with his work while the noise grew louder and louder till it resolved itself—though not as yet to him who heeded it not—into the creaking of two pair of wheels which conveyed a coach of cumbrous mould that was with difficulty tugged along

the rugged road by four stout dapples. As the ungainly vehicle wheezed and squeaked its way along the high road Hercules lifted his head for a moment, gave it a glance over his shoulder, and a smile—he had seen such coaches in the Spanish Americas—and then returned with a fresh zest to his pitchfork.

He had been busy for quite a time, as it seemed to him, before he became aware of two circumstances. The first was that the creaking and grumbling of the coach, instead of waxing as it passed his gate and then waning as it drifted slowly out of earshot, had ceased altogether. The second was that the voice of a woman—and a fresh young voice it sounded—was hailing him.

Hercules looked up and saw that the gaudy ark of a coach had come to a halt at his garden gate and that the aperture of its near window framed a woman's face. To eyes that were trained in the scanning of great sea spaces it was easy to be sure, across the tumbled earth and the grass plot and the gateway in the privet hedge, to see that the face so framed was a pretty face, imperious in its prettiness and insolent in its empire. He stayed for a moment from his task, leaning on the staff of his fork with the prongs buried in the earth while he surveyed the lady. He had seen a world of beauties in his days, but this unknown took his taste amazingly. And yet not unknown neither. He was conscious that the face seemed familiar to him, and yet he was very certain that he had never seen it before in the flesh. That thought set him right, recalling Philemon's picture. This, then, was the loveliness that Philemon had praised so highly and on account of whom the Frenchman and Italian had brawled in the woods. He eyed her with a livelier curiosity, studying her with a steady stare that found its justification in the fact of her summons. He did not trouble himself to find similes for her eyes, for her hair or for her lips. He took her face just as it was framed in the window of the coach, as he would have taken a portrait in some gallery, and so taking it he found it greatly to his liking, and was far from unwilling to think that she desired speech with him, even though it interrupted his immediate business with the roses.

He could not for the life of him conceive what the pretty

lady had to say to him, unless, indeed, she and the gaudy wain she travelled in had lost their way. But it was not to be doubted that the pretty lady desired speech with him, for she was calling again as imperiously as before and a trifle louder.

"Come hither, clown," she commanded, in a voice that rang on the man's ear with a curious blend of sweetness and shrillness at once teasing and taking.

Hercules let his fork fall to the ground and swung with the great strides of a deck-dancing mariner till he came to the garden-gate, and, pulling it back, stood in the opening squarely regarding the lady. The nearer he came to her the more he liked her, appraising as was his wont, not by appearances only, but by hints and inferences. He liked the way of her hair and the hue of her eyes, and the carnation of her cheeks and the impudence of her lips, and he liked, when he heard it again as he did very speedily, that before-noted mingled sweetness and shrillness of her voice. If he still disdained the brawling aliens he began to understand Philemon's raptures.

He would have been very content to stand for a long time in his gateway and contemplate a countenance so fair and gay and alluring. But the owner of the countenance did not admit or think that she was there to be stared at and in consequence she left the man little leisure for his contemplation.

"Tell me, fellow," the lady said, "who is the owner of this house."

Hercules realised that the pretty lady took him for a labourer on the place, and did not in the least resent the inference. He had served before the mast in his time and was willing to pass now for one that served behind the spade. He answered her with composure.

"That house," he said, "belongs to a master mariner that is newly returned to England from the foreign seas."

The pretty lady was not at the pains to discern the difference between the man's address and his habit.

"Is your master within?" she asked; "for if he is I would fain speak with him."

Hercules shook his head and smiled so small a smile at the lady's impatience that it was lost upon the lady.

"The master of the house is not within," he averred. The lady frowned and looked disappointed.

"That is a pity," she protested pettishly. "Will you tell him when he returns that I heard of this strange house of his and that I have a fancy for it, and a mind to take it off his hands?"

The man smiled a wide smile and his eyes danced, but his voice was steady as he answered gravely:

"That is a kind message to send and the house is honoured by your approval. Would it please you, since you favour it on hearsay, to quit your coach for a season and survey it from the gardens?"

Clarenda's eyes brightened.

"Have you the right," she questioned, "to show the garden in its master's absence?"

"I have the right to show the garden," the man answered quietly, and in a moment, without further parley, the fingers of Mistress Clarenda were fumbling at the coach door.

The man found a great if silent entertainment in playing the guide to the pretty lady through the flower gardens and vegetable gardens of his abode. She talked so cheerfully as she went, liking this thing and liking that, and taking no more notice of him than she would have taken of any respectable serving-man who played the guide in his master's absence, that Hercules was vastly diverted and kept a straight face with difficulty.

But it was the house itself, when she gained a full view of it, that commanded her highest raptures. There it stood for all the world like a great sea-going ship, with its port-holes and its poop and its figure-head and all, sailing its way, as it seemed, on a sea of smooth green turf, and about its bows in great gold letters the legend "The Golden Hart." She clapped her hands for joy as she beheld it in all its audacious oddity, and ran nimbly this way and that on the grass to admire it from various points of view. Hercules guessed very readily that she was longing to study the interior as well as the exterior, but he said nothing to gratify that purpose, having formed in his mind some vague plans of his own, and even Clarenda's boldness was not game for so impudent a proposal.

When the inspection was made and the pretty lady stood by the steps of her coach again Hercules saw, with increased amusement, that she had her purse in her hand and that her fingers had fished out a silver crown which she was plainly on the point of tendering to him.

"Will you tell your master," she said—and as she spoke she offered him the silver crown which he took from her fingers without the slightest hesitation—"that I like the looks of this house exceedingly, that in a word I have lost my heart to it, and that he has but to name his price?"

"Even if he does not wish to sell?" the man questioned, with a smileless face.

"Of course he will wish to sell," the girl replied with a slight frown, "if I am willing to pay the price."

"You speak very confidently," the man replied gravely, "and yet I have a notion that the place is not to be sold."

Clarenda made a gesture of impatience.

"What do you know about it?" she protested. Her foot was on the coach step when she turned again to address him.

"You will deliver my message to your master," the girl said, "for I desire a speedy reply."

"The message is already delivered," the man said as quietly as before. "I am—the master of this house."

A flood of colour flushed the girl's cheeks. She was vexed, penitent, humiliated and insolent, all in a jiffy.

"Why did you not tell me this before?" she asked angrily. "Why have you dared to make a fool of me?"

Hercules shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly. He was much pleased with the girl's face, animated by its touch of anger.

"You did not ask the question," he said calmly. "Is your servant a dog that he should bark at a visitor?"

He was so good-humoured and so entirely free from any trace of annoyance that Clarenda was compelled, in spite of her irritation, to suit her temper to his.

"I am truly sorry," she protested, "that I should have made so vile a mistake, and I can do no more and no better than to crave your forgiveness."

The man laughed now, freely and merrily.

"It is to ask and have," he declared, "if there be any-

thing to forgive, which I do not admit, for I cannot see that you could guess my identity unless I carried my name writ large across my breast, like the poor rogues in the pillory. But my name, at your service, is Hercules Flood."

The girl was not too perturbed by her blunder not to seek to press her case now she knew that she was face to face with the master of the coveted dwelling-place.

"My name," she said, "is Clarendia Constant, and I dwell, for the time, with my lady Gylford at King's Welcome yonder. And since you have forgiven my mistake, perhaps you will give me an answer yourself to my question?"

The information that the young lady vouchsafed conveyed nothing more to its hearer than its exact purport. Hercules Flood had been too long abroad and was too newly home to know anything, as he would never have cared anything, about the rumours of London or the gossip of the Court. He might, had he been put to it, have recalled after much cudgelling of memory that King's Welcome was the property of my lord of Godalming, but the fact would have seemed to him of very little importance.

"I must hear your question anew, now that I am no longer man but master," he said slowly, for he found himself oddly unwilling to part with his impudent visitor. "What you have said to the fellow with the pitchfork has gone in at one ear and out at the other." As he spoke he stooped down, and picking up his jerkin where he had laid it down he drew it leisurely upon his body. "Now that I have a coat about me," he continued, "I may parley at ease with a lady by my gate. What is your question?"

"I have taken a fancy to your house," Clarendia asserted, something less confidently than before. "I should be glad to buy it if you are willing to sell. You need not fear that the question of price will vex me."

"This is something sudden," the man replied, "and I cannot answer it all at once through the rail of a gate. Nor can you judge fairly of a house of which you have seen no more than the skin. If you will be at the pains to come again to-morrow at about this time of the day, you shall see inside as well as outside, and I will promise to give you a plain answer to a plain question."

Clarenda frowned a little for she found the man's bearing something off-hand and disdainful to one that was used of late to an excess of deference.

"How if I do not choose to come?" she questioned sharply.

Hercules shrugged his shoulders.

"That is for you to decide," he said quietly. "But there is my answer, and beyond it I will not budge."

"Well," said Clarenda slowly, after a moment of reflection. "If you cannot make up your mind to a straight answer, neither can I. But this much I may assure you. I will come to-morrow or I will not come to-morrow."

Hercules laughed heartily and Clarenda, for all that she was vexed with him, saw that laughter sat wholesomely upon his sunburnt face.

"You have made a safe promise," he said, "and one that you are bound to keep, which is more than can be said of most of the promises that are made in this world. And it is wise to remember that, whichever way you keep it, the sun will set."

Clarenda gave no other answer to this piece of philosophy than to lean a little out of the coach window and bid the driver go home. Then she dropped back among her cushions and sat so, looking steadily before her, that Hercules could see little more of her than the tip of her nose, before the four dapples strained at their traces and the great gold coach rocked itself into motion and lurched forward again upon its way. Hercules still leaning by his garden gate watched it making its cumbrous way along the high road until it was out of sight. He was thinking hard and the gist of his reflections was that he was mightily taken with the young woman. She was certainly impudent; she was certainly a minx, but she was, no less certainly, very delectable to regard.

CHAPTER XVI

WILL SHE NOT COME AGAIN

HERCULES found himself wondering, more than he thought either prudent or judicious, if the young lady would indeed pay him another visit. He assured himself, with great lustiness, that he did not care a snap of the fingers what she did, and then laughed heartily at himself for wasting time in telling himself lies. For indeed he found that he was very much taken with the girl. Her beauty stirred him profoundly; he had seen many beautiful women, but this maid seemed in her way to sum all the wonder of English loveliness into one perfection. Then her capriciousness amused him; her imperiousness, which might have irritated another, only served to tickle him. He saw plainly enough that she considered him nothing better than a bumpkin and little better than a boor, and he was content, for the present, not to gainsay her humour, which seemed to promise him diversion. In short, he was so sharp set to see her again that he was ready to submit, with a smile, to her pretty impertinences so long as he might see her, much as a big dog will submit to rough and naughty treatment at the hands of a spoiled child.

He found the evening too long for his taste, though he passed it at the "Dolphin," where for once the wine seemed to run thin and the talk to lack sap. The morning found him abroad betimes and very busy in the furbishing of his ship-house that it should show to the best advantage if the lady came. He gave his people neither peace nor rest till all was in apple-pie order from galley to poop; and as for the gardener, if he had been grandfather Adam himself, he could not have realised the floral miracles which the impatience of his master wished him to accomplish. Though his will and his fellows' zeal worked wonders he was at the end more dissatisfied with the result than he would have been if he were told to expect the honour of a visit from

the Queen. When, however, he was satisfied that there was really nothing more to be done, he ceased to drive and direct his folk and went out into the garden to walk there and wrestle with impatience.

Would she come or would she not come? While he was trying to tell himself that it was all one to him either way, he found himself hoping that she might come in the forenoon and that he might, who knows, be able to persuade her to stay to dinner. But the forenoon flamed and waned without sign of the lady and at length, having no excuse to delay further, he sat down to a retarded banquet, at which, in spite of his agitation, he distinguished himself, according to his custom, very creditably.

He had come to an end of his meal and was degusting, with leisure and appreciation, a goblet of Burgundy—for he loved the wines of France better than those of Almain or Spain—when he heard a sound that made him drain his glass, wipe his lips, and rise to his feet with alacrity. The sound which he heard was in itself of most undelectable composition, being no other than the squeaking and creaking of a set of carriage wheels, but he had never heard a trumpet call to clear for action that sounded brisker, or a church bell that sounded sweeter. He was overboard and through his floriferous garden and at his garden gate in a twinkling and there, sure enough, on the highway, having just made the turn of the road by the finger-post, was the great gold-coloured coach wheezing and grunting its way between the hedgerows.

His heart sang within him, but he kept a smooth face and even a stolid one as the lumbering vehicle came to a halt and the prettiest face in the world—as he was now ready to assert and maintain—appeared at the window and smiled at him in a lively audacity. It did Hercules good to see the damsel, but he controlled any show of satisfaction as he opened his garden gate and, stepping into the road, saluted the girl with as formal a gravity as if he had been a Spanish hidalgo instead of an English seafarer.

"Well, savage," said Clarendra, smiling, "am I not a gracious lady to visit you again?" Hercules surveyed her with a placid face. He was not going to let this adorable baggage know how attractive she was.

"You come," he said slowly, "because you want to get something; not because you want to come. If you wanted to come less than you wanted what you come to get, I take it, in all straightforwardness, that you would not have come."

He said this with a quiet stubbornness that made Clarendra decide that he was a bumpkin and an oaf. But it amused her to dazzle any man, and there was no reason in the world why a bumpkin and an oaf should not be dazzled like his betters.

"You speak very sagely," she agreed; "and show a vast comprehension of the working of a woman's mind. I am still in the same humour that I dwelt in yesterday. I would like to take this oddfish of a house off your hands. Will you sell, good sir? Will you sell?"

Hercules looked the girl up and down, with a stare as vacant as he could command.

"Why, you see," he said slowly, "I have no mind to sell in a hurry what I built at my ease."

A frown wrinkled the alabaster forehead—so styled to weariness by the courtly poets—of Mistress Clarendra and straightened sourly the crimson bow of her mouth.

"You are a savage," she protested, "and nothing but a savage. Why, there are gallants in London who would lose the world lightly to please me, and here are you making a pother about a silly old ship-shaped barn."

"The silliness of my house, or the wisdom of my house," said Hercules gravely, "is nothing to the purpose. Silly be it or wise we both have a liking for it. But also I have a liking for you."

He looked so solemnly at the girl as he spoke that she was hard put to it to restrain from laughter, although she was tempted to admit that she was vexed by the bluntness of his praises. She was accustomed to a very different method of commendation.

"I am mightily obliged to you," she protested, and felt as she spoke that she flamed against her will under the scrutiny of that unexpressive face.

"There is no occasion to thank me," he said tranquilly. "God that made you fair gave me the wit to understand his handiwork. I have been here and been there, but I

swear that I have never seen a fairer maid than you. If you are as good as you are fair, you are a wonderful woman."

"I am what I am," Clarendra said, somewhat sharply, for this man had a manner of stating his mind which was very different from the court fashion, and it galled her sensitiveness. "I have come to talk of your house, not of myself."

Master Flood smiled affably.

"Before we talk further on this matter," he suggested, "shall we change from the open road to the garden or the hall? You have seen no more than the outside of my poor dwelling thus far. Will you not honour me by coming within and gaining a knowledge of interior as well as exterior? Perhaps you may find that the place does not improve upon acquaintance."

He opened the carriage door as he spoke and extending his hand assisted Clarendra to alight.

It gave Hercules a great deal of pleasure to shepherd the young lady over "The Golden Hart," and it seemed to give the young lady a great deal of pleasure to see what she saw. She professed to be in ecstasies over the strangeness of the device and to long more than ever to lodge in such an enchanted ship.

"Truly," she protested, "I like your house."

"And truly," he parodied, "I like your countenance."

She laughed at him, half amused, half annoyed.

"Truly," she said again, "I am much obliged to you."

"There is nothing to be obliged at," he said quietly.

"If you carry a comely face and I get the chance of a good look at it, I have the right to admire it, I suppose?"

"But not necessarily the right to tell me as much," the girl commented maliciously.

Hercules shrugged his shoulders.

"If you know me well enough," he replied, "to seek on our first meeting to buy my house over my head, surely I know you well enough on our second meeting to tell you that I find you fair-looking. But, however that may be, I am a plain fellow and I say my say. Because I have a liking for this house of mine I have no mind to sell it. But

because I have a liking for you I have a month's mind to lend it."

"Lend it?" Clarendra echoed in some surprise, as if she did not, and indeed she could not, understand his drift.

"I reckon you to be a maid that takes sudden fancies," he said slowly, as one that enunciates a theory arrived at after due and becoming deliberation; "and you might tire of a fancy as quickly as you were fired by it. Am I not right in this thought of mine?"

Clarendra knew very well that he was right, but it annoyed her that he should have stated the case so clearly and that she should, if she spoke the truth, be compelled to admit it.

"Most people," she said a little sharply, "take fancies that they do not always wish to endure for ever."

Master Flood nodded his head with a great air of agreement.

"Exactly so," he approved; "exactly so. And so on the top of that admission I have a proposition to make."

Clarendra regarded him steadfastly.

"What is your proposition?" she asked, and there was a note of challenge in her voice. She was a little puzzled by this strange person and also a little interested.

"Why," responded Hercules, "my proposition comes to this, in as few words as I can find. I will not sell my house and I will not lease my house, but I will lend my house for as long as you stay in the West Country, to do as you please with—on one condition."

Clarendra looked keenly at him.

"And what may that condition be?" she asked.

Master Flood replied slowly as before.

"That you permit me to pay you a visit of an hour's duration each morning or afternoon as best may please your convenience, and talk to me of all the things that have happened here at home in England in the years that I have been at sea."

"That is a curious condition, Master Flood," said Clarendra.

Hercules shook his head.

"Not so," he argued gravely; "surely not so. Here am I a seafaring man that am newly come ashore after some years of absence from my native land. Here and there in this

port and in that port I have heard such news as were big enough to travel so far. I have learned if we were at war, I have learned if we were at peace. Since I came home and have lived yonder"—he indicated Plymouth with a slight jerk of the head—"I have been told many things that piece together my knowledge of the past. But news travels slowly to the West Country, and indeed we West Country folk are a little indifferent to the affairs of other places. I am of a more curious humour, and you that come from the east and from London can, if you do but choose, instruct me much."

Mistress Clarendra was somewhat taken aback by the drift of her companion's discourse. It was not a little staggering to find that the society of a beautiful young woman was sought after because of the amount of information she might be able to impart to a newly returned mariner. If it confirmed confidence in the speaker it was scarcely complimentary to herself.

"I must commend your desire for knowledge, Master Flood," she said somewhat shortly, "but I think there must needs be many a man in the neighbourhood that could serve your turn better than I."

He shook his head slowly, as a man that had made up his mind and stuck to his point.

"You hail from London," he answered, "and come thence later than any I know. And besides, being a woman you will have things to tell that a man might forget or hold of little account. Further, to put an end to the argument, if you have taken a fancy to my house, I have taken a fancy to your society, so there is the bargain laid on the table for plain yea or nay."

He was very pertinacious, Clarendra thought; in fact, the term "pig-headed" would aptly have expressed her mental opinion of him. Her first impulse was to refuse him hotly, because she was annoyed with him for being so familiar in his manner, and with herself for having been in some degree the cause and the justification of the familiarity. But her second thought prompted her to accept. After all, if he were in a measure familiar or at least, to put it more gently, a trifle too much at his ease, he was sufficiently courteous and wholly decorous.

She lingered and dallied, tossed between two minds, either

to make a great show of anger at his impudence and go off in a tantrum, or to take him on his terms with a covert purpose of punishing him hereafter for that same impudence. As she was really desirous—and now more desirous than ever—of enjoying the fantastic attractions of "The Golden Hart," she decided on the latter course. With the airiest grace she accepted the terms of Master Hercules and trundled back to King's Welcome in all the gravity of her decision.

The execution of the compact, signed, sealed and delivered, as it were, between Clarendra and Hercules, would have seemed to many a gentleman author of the age to contain the material for a very pretty pastoral, masque, or comedy. There was, to begin with, a tearing scene between Mistress Clarendra and my lady Gylford. That relic of the age of the eighth Harry began by an attempt sternly to forbid the young woman from carrying out her proposed plan. When Clarendra triumphantly appealed to the charter of my lord Godalming's letter, the old lady asserted roundly that she would have no share in the disgraceful business, and to justify her determination promptly took to her bed and announced her resolution to remain there until further notice. From that haven she penned an indignant letter to Lord Godalming, telling him what had occurred and formally washing her hands of her wardship. Clarendra, mulishly obstinate to opposition, would not yield an inch of her whim, but as she had the wit to perceive that she could not set up her staff at "The Golden Hart" wholly unguarded she promptly busied herself to seek, and seeking no less promptly found a wholly decorous, well-bred, elderly gentlewoman of the neighbourhood, relict of a former Mayor of Plymouth, who was quite willing for a fitting remuneration to take charge of the land-ship and keep house, if the term could be used with fitness, for its madcap new master.

All this was by the way to Clarendra, whose one idea was to lodge herself at "The Golden Hart," and who cared not whom she vexed or upset so long as she did so. Had not her antiquated betrothed promised her the very perfection of liberty and should she not make full use of her privilege? By the way, too, seemed at first the inevitable daily visit of her landlord, Master Hercules Flood, whom she had assured

herself she would have little difficulty in choking off and dismissing.

But here Clarendon reckoned without her host, in the fullest sense of the phrase. At the first visit which Master Flood paid her she found herself, in spite of her resentment against him because of his coolly enforced condition, very unquestionably taken by his frank and engaging manner, by his easy if quite unostentatious carriage of equality, by his large familiarity with men and cities—like a certain famous Greek sailor of whom the Queen had told her tales—by the simplicity and directness of his speech, and, best of all, by his lively interest in and lively admiration of herself. After his second visit she allowed the fact that she bore him a grudge to sink for the time being into a half oblivion. The grudge was not forgotten, the offence was not forgiven, but both, for the moment, were suffered to lie upon the shelf.

CHAPTER XVII

A VISITOR TO KING'S WELCOME

SIR BATTY and his companions, Mr. Winwood and Mr. Willoughby, journeyed at leisure and in comfort from London to the West Country. They broke their course at such points as pleased them most, which meant where the inns were best. The Master of the Lesser Revels and Mr. Winwood were both lovers of good cheer and epicures in their judgment of it. Mr. Willoughby, who had come from the West Country with simple tastes for your honest roast and your honest boiled and plenty of both, had striven with no very great success to accommodate his appetite to the more delicate feeding of the courtiers, but he found some consolation for an abstinence that was after all only relative in the knowledge that he was free to drink as he pleased. Wherever they halted—and they halted at some ancient and famous towns—the trio showed no manner of interest in what the place might have of noteworthy to show, but when they had stretched their legs for a few moments after quitting the saddle, they settled themselves to supper and thereafter devoted the leave of the evening to play, to which form of entertainment all the three seemed equally devoted, though with far from equal fortunes.

Mr. Willoughby could not consider himself, if he ever indulged in consideration of any kind, as a gamester that was favoured by the goddess of play. Not that he always lost, by any means. Every now and then after there had been a steady run on his purse he would win quite a thumping sum of money and this access of victory was always sufficient to set him afresh in the good spirits that his losses had temporarily lowered. He might have noted, however, if he had been a gentleman of nimbler apprehension, that these gains invariably happened only when there was a large stock of his money in the hands either of Mr. Win-

wood or of Sir Batty, so that he was but getting back a little of what had been his own. Also a careful calculation of the state of play at the end of the week would have made it plain that Mr. Willoughby was always largely to the bad, while Sir Batty and his friend, Mr. Winwood, were always to the good and pretty equally so. Willoughby, however, who had no calculating mind, was content enough to go on playing and paying, either in ready cash or in sprawling notes of hand, encouraged by occasional fallacious wins, and at all times satisfied with the thought that he was keeping very good company and was well on the way to become a very fine gentleman indeed.

They got to Mr. Willoughby's place beyond Tavistock in good time, and since Mr. Willoughby had sent a servant in advance at the last stage, they found all in readiness to receive them and their train at Willoughby Homing. Mr. Willoughby in his heart was something ashamed of the old-fashioned place and the old-fashioned servitors who would, he feared, seem very mean and droll in the eyes of his fine town friends. But he had no reason to blush for his dwelling, which was a warm, well-built and roomy specimen of a country squire's abode. As for the servants whose honestly outspoken expressions of pleasure at seeing their young master again much embarrassed Mr. Willoughby, if they were a trifle homely and rustical they knew their business well and did it with a will, which was more than could be said of many of their class in more pretentious mansions. Even if Mr. Willoughby's establishment had been as ridiculous as it seemed in the view of its thankless master, his guests would have been at once too well bred and too wary to offend their host by any open show of amusement. But the food was good and well cooked, the wine old and excellent, the beds soft and ample.

"If where you play well," said Sir Batty to Mr. Winwood sententiously, "you also eat well, drink well, and sleep well, what more need you ask?"

On the following morning Sir Batty Sellars mounted his nag before the porch of Willoughby Homing at a comfortable hour after a comfortable meal. He explained to his host that he purposed to ride abroad and to ride alone. He was interested, so he asserted, in the lay of the country

and wished to make investigations. Honest Willoughby, who would never have dreamed of traversing the hint, let alone the wish of the man whom he was pleased to regard as a demi-god, had, of course, nothing to say in objection to the scheme, although he felt that the sunshine faded from a day which was not spent in so magnificent a companionship. Mr. Winwood was indeed a fine gentleman truly, but to Willoughby he had not the fascination, perhaps because he had not the well-assumed amiability of the Master of the Lesser Revels. If honest Willoughby could cherish a grudge at being rooked of his money it was when the spoils fell ostensibly to Spencer Winwood. For Winwood hustled them into his pocket as a matter of course, whereas Sir Batty when he won—which was his custom—was always ready with a half regretful explanation of how some little trivial thing had happened to spoil the skill of Willoughby's playing.

To Spencer Winwood Sir Batty had explained in private that he quitted him on important business, and that he trusted to him to pluck the pigeon nimbly and briskly during his brief absence. Mr. Winwood, to whom pigeon never occasioned indigestion however often he partook of the meat, agreed with complete cheerfulness. He found and did indeed all but assert in words, that Mr. Willoughby was a dull goose, but at least he was a golden goose. Also, as Sir Batty pointed out, since he and Mr. Winwood evenly divided the plunder, while the play of Sir Batty was infinitely superior to that of Mr. Winwood, it was only fair that Sir Batty should, if it pleased him, take a holiday from the partnership for once and apply himself to his own individual recreation. Wherefore it came to pass that Sir Batty, having mounted his nag, rode at a lively trot in the direction of Plymouth town, while Mr. Winwood and his host, after waving adieus to the departing horseman, were very ready to retire into one of the snug rooms of Willoughby Homing and traffic with the kings and queens and their four sets of followers until the exquisite spring day had dwindled into candle time. Sir Batty before leaving had laid out an elaborate plan for Mr. Winwood's benefit, on which were duly charted the few, the very few, occasions on which Mr. Willoughby was to be permitted to win.

Sir Batty rode at a leisurely pace, because, though he was both sound and strong and physically well-knit, he held it folly to solicit fatigue unnecessarily. He came in the course of time within sight of Plymouth town and began to make enquiries as to the whereabouts of King's Welcome. He had never been in the West Country before and he cared little for its beauties, being in every atom of his composition a bird of the town, one that loved torches better than daylight, the scent of essences to the breath of the hedge-rows, and the fall of cards to the fall of petals. But it was impossible not to get some satisfaction from the sweet air and the sweet influences of the countryside, and moreover Sir Batty was travelling towards a much desired goal. Therefore his questionings were gracious, for information was generous, so that it seemed to him as if less time had passed than had really elapsed since he left Willoughby Homing before he found himself cantering blithely along the green sideway that he had been assured by his latest adviser would bring him both quickly and directly to King's Welcome.

If King's Welcome was one of the least of the many possessions over which my lord of Godalming might very truly have been said to reign, it would have seemed an ample and a handsome palace to many a nobleman of standing, or well-to-do country gentleman. When it had originally been planned and mainly executed in the dusk of the reign of Henry the Sixth, Plymouth was a much smaller town than it showed on the day when Sir Batty paid it a visit, and King's Welcome counted as a country house upon a removed ground. But with the intervening years the sea-port had so swelled its volume and so encroached upon its surrounding region that the stately manor of King's Welcome stood, as it were, upon the very fringe of the town. It was indeed so engirdled by its grounds and its trees and its walls that it was able to preserve for itself and its residents as pleasing a sense of rural seclusion as could be desired. But nevertheless there was the patent fact that the outskirts of Plymouth might almost be said to be within a stone's throw of its park gates.

Sir Batty, passing through those gates and drawing rein in front of the door of King's Welcome, was met on the

instant with a surprise and a disappointment. For he learned from the servant who answered his summons that Mistress Clenda Constant was not within the precincts of King's Welcome. A Majordomo, promptly summoned, informed the knight that Mistress Constant had verily been residing there for some time—this indeed brought balm of satisfaction to Sir Batty's annoyance—but she had very recently been pleased to shift her quarters. It would, however, so it seemed to the worthy Majordomo, be the best thing if the visitor would seek speech of my lady Gylford, who would be able, more fully and more becomingly, to afford him information.

Sir Batty, having expressed his instant readiness to wait upon my lady Gylford, entrusted his nag to the care of the servitor and followed the solemn Majordomo of King's Welcome through a multiplicity of halls, and corridors and passages until he was brought to a halt in an ante-chamber overlooking a pleasant garden. Here the Majordomo left him for a moment while he passed into an inner room, from which he emerged in an instant with the message that Lady Gylford begged him to enter.

Sir Batty followed his usher into a large gaunt room adorned with a number of portraits. There was a great hearth on which, in spite of the seasonable mildness of the day, a brisk fire was burning, and in front of the fire an old lady was seated in a high arm-chair. She was a very prim and trim old lady, neither over-fat nor over-lean, but of a comfortable plumpness which went, with the relative smoothness of her skin, to suggest a taste for tranquillity habitually enjoyed. From the general effect of her person and the details of her costume Sir Batty, who had a shrewd eye for such matters, reasoned her out as an ancient dame for whom the world had not moved since the days of bluff Harry. The good lady had been painted by Holbein—Sir Batty saw as much from one of the pictures on the walls—and as painted by Holbein the good lady remained through all the years that had passed between then and now. She still dressed as ladies dressed in the days when men lost their hearts and their heads to Anne Boleyn, and in his mind Sir Batty decided that she was a figure of fun. But he showed nothing of all this in his countenance as he advanced towards

the hearth and its priestess and paid her a profound salutation.

The old lady, without rising, bowed an acknowledgment of his greeting, and then in a voice which nature had intended to be comfortable, but which its owner now forced to be querulous, she spoke, without any preface or preliminary.

"I am sure I do not know what the world is coming to nowadays."

Sir Batty, after another obeisance, begged to be informed in what particular my lady Gylford esteemed the world to be out of gear.

The old lady surveyed him with round, childish, astonished eyes.

"In what particular?" she echoed. "Do I understand you to ask in what particular?" Without waiting for her visitor to reply she went on: "But first, pray be seated."

Sir Batty drew the chair which the Majordomo had set for him before withdrawing, to a discreet distance from the fire, for he was already sufficiently warm with his ride and the fine morning, and sat himself upon it in an attitude of respectful attention to the old lady's observations.

"You are Sir Batty Sellars?" the old lady asked.

Sir Batty, having affirmed his identity by a polite inclination, the old lady went on again.

"Are you a relation of the Batty Sellars who had the honour to be Master of the Horse to his late Majesty King Henry of blessed memory?"

"He was my grandfather," Sir Batty answered. He was not at all interested in his grandfather, but he affected the liveliest interest because he conceived that it might prove useful to him to conciliate the beldame, as he mentally termed her.

"Ah! there was a man if you like," sighed the old lady. "We don't make men in that mould nowadays, do we?" Then, as if suddenly recollecting herself, she continued: "Not that you are not very well in your way, which is of no ill fashion, but to be round with you, you are not a patch upon your grandfather."

Sir Batty murmured something to the effect that he had always understood that his grandfather was a very fine figure of a man. He was very anxious to get to the object of

his visit and much resented the intrusion of his ancestor, though he was careful to show no resentment.

"There were men in those days," the old lady mused, "and women, too, if I may be allowed to say so, not silly chits and minxes. And talking of chits and minxes, I understand, Sir Batty, that you have been enquiring after Mistress Clarendon Constant?"

"Why, yes, my lady," Sir Batty replied. "I had the felicity to become acquainted with the young lady at Court, where I have the honour to hold a small office under the favour of her Majesty."

"Not Master of the Horse, by any chance?" asked Lady Gylford, with such a sympathetic tenderness in her tone as amused Sir Batty.

"The devil, the devil," he said to himself, "the dear old lady evidently cherished tender sentiments for my grandfather in the days of Noah." Aloud he answered: "No, my lady, I am privileged to call myself Master of the Lesser Revels."

Lady Gylford gave a sniff which seemed to suggest that she found as great a declension from old days in the office as in its holder.

"And what," she asked, as sharply as was compatible with her habit of body and of mind, "might you be wanting with Mistress Clarendon Constant?"

If Sir Batty had answered in all candour he would have probably astonished his hearer a good deal. He was careful to reply warily.

"I am aware of the young lady's fortunate betrothal to your illustrious kinsman, and as I am on a visit in the neighbourhood it seemed to me no more than mannerly to ride over and pay my respects."

"You have wasted your time in coming here," the old lady assured him; but Sir Batty politely begged to differ from her.

"Even if I had been aware of Mistress Clarendon's absence," he declared, "I should have ventured to presume so far upon my slight acquaintance with that distinguished nobleman, my lord of Godalming, as to entreat permission to wait upon one who at once remembers and renews the glories of the past, and who does my namesake of

another day the honour to accord him a place in her memory."

Poor Lady Gylford had not been addressed after this manner for many a long day, and it undoubtedly pleased her. She gave the young man such an approving smile that he was tempted to beat a retreat before she could have the time to render a transfer of her affections from the former Master of the Horse to the present Master of the Lesser Revels. However, Lady Gylford's approval did not go so far.

"I am gratified," she said, "to find that there are still some of the youth of to-day, of the male youth that is to say, who are worthy to have moved in the great days and breathed the fine air of the time of King Henry, eighth of his name."

"Are there no women," asked Sir Batty, with a view to bringing the conversation round to Clarendon again, "who are worthy to have breathed that fine air?"

"None," replied the old lady, emphatically. "No young women, that is to say, or at least none whom I know or hear tell of. Young women were young women, I can assure you, in King Henry's days."

"And what may they happen to be now?" Sir Batty ventured to enquire, with a great air of innocence.

"Chits and minxes," replied the old lady briskly, "chits and minxes. And of all the chits and all the minxes commend me to Mistress Clarendon Constant."

Sir Batty allowed himself to look some of the interest which he felt.

"May I make so bold," he requested, "as to beg a little illumination on this matter which, as you may guess, is of no small concern to one that knows the Court and my lord of Godalming?"

Lady Gylford shook her head mournfully and fetched a couple of deep sighs.

"Whatever can have happened to my poor unhappy cousin," she groaned, "to make him behave in this extravagant and fantastic manner, I cannot, for the life of me, imagine. Surely he must be the laughing-stock of the Court, even of such a Court."

Sir Batty, ever prudent where he believed that it concerned his interests to be prudent, hastened to assure her

that no one at Court would presume to comment upon any conduct of my lord Godalming.

"Then Courts have changed for the worse since my day," Lady Gylford asserted with a sniff. "I have known no Court, I thank Heaven, since the last Court of King Harry, but if a man of my cousin's age had dared to make such a gaby of himself he would have been the butt of the universe, from the king on his throne to the scullion in the buttery."

"Times change and soften manners," Sir Batty reflected with satisfaction. There seemed to him to be a definite vulgarity about the age of his grandfather, and incidentally of the eighth Henry, which made it a poor contrast to the polish of his own day. He considered Lord Godalming as ridiculous as you please, but he admired the temper which restrained him and others from saying so in his presence.

"When he first writ me of his intentions," pursued the old lady morosely, and more as if she were confiding to the fire than to her companion, "I thought the poor old dotard had taken a temporary leave of his senses. But when the mawkin came along with her airs and her graces and with my lord's precise instructions that she was to be humoured and honoured and obeyed in everything, then indeed I was very sure that he had said a final good-bye to his wits."

"Mistress Constant is accounted one of the handsomest women at Court," put in Sir Batty with the air of one who proffers a reasonable excuse.

"What a devil has that to do with it?" cried the old lady, with a greater vivacity than she had hitherto shown. "When old flesh goes a-wedding, it goes a-lechering, which is a filthy thing in old flesh." The good lady continued to express herself in this strain with a vehement freedom and directness of speech which amazed as much as it amused Sir Batty, who for all that he was a profligate and a libertine, liked to carry his sins in the polite manner. Once again he thanked his stars that it had been given to him to abide in the precision, breeding and decorum of Elizabeth's Court, and he found himself wondering if a later generation would ever arise, yet more polite and refined, which would regard his own happy age as something strange, removed and uncouth. He soothed himself by deciding that

such could never come to pass, and once more addressed himself to his beldame.

"Am I to believe," he asked, "that my lord of Godalming wished Mistress Clarendra to be treated as if she were in verity a little queen?"

"You may believe as much," confirmed the old lady gloomily, "although it sounds unbelievable. She was to do what she pleased, forsooth, to learn what she pleased, forsooth. She had but to ask for and have a golden coach, forsooth. But when it came to going and living in a house like a ship, my patience came to an end, I warrant you."

"In a house like a ship?" Sir Batty repeated, frankly surprised. "I fear me that I fail altogether to follow your ladyship."

"Yet I speak plainly enough, do I not?" snapped the old lady, with an unexpected ferocity. "There came a Tom Fool to these parts, from sailing the seas, who was mad ass enough to build himself a house that was shaped like a ship upon dry land, as if the fellow were a second Noah waiting for a second Deluge. And it seems that this crazy jade whom I was set to bear-ward catches sight of this top of folly, and being a bigger fool than the builder, sets her silly heart upon it and persuades the sea-calf to part with it for I know not what sum of wasted money."

Sir Batty listened to the old lady's strange tale with a carefully concealed astonishment. He had divined Clarendra to be whimsical, but he had not realised how whimsical she might prove if no limit were set to the range of her whim.

"But had you nothing to say in this matter?" he asked.

The old lady responded with increasing asperity.

"Nothing whatever. The instructions of my lord were as precise as they were comprehensive. Whatever this baggage pleased to do she was free to do. Whatever money she was pleased to squander she was free to squander. I will indeed do her the justice to admit that she seemed to be under the belief that I would accompany her in her crack-brained change of lodging. But no, young gentleman, no. I am willing to endure much to please my lord of Godalming, even to the entertaining and cossetting and humouring a lunatic maid for whom he has conceived a senile desire. But I will not for him, or for any one else, consent at

my time of life to quit a reputable dwelling in order to lie like a boatswain in a land-logged hull. No, not if my lord of Godalming were twenty times my cousin and twenty times as kind as I freely agree that I have ever found him."

"Then what," asked Sir Batty, "has Mistress Constant been pleased to do in this difficulty?"

"She has been pleased to flout me," responded Lady Gylford glumly. "She has gone over to this ramshackle ship-shape place with her maid-servants and her man-servants, and if she has not indeed taken with her her ox and her ass, she has found as good a likeness of the first in a Plymouth matron to be her housekeeper as she herself, in her skittishness, provides one of the other."

"Dio mio," said Sir Batty, whose fashion it was to air Italianisms, "you have told me an amazing tale. It would afford me more entertainment if the heroine were not the affianced bride of so revered a nobleman as my lord of Godalming."

He said this with so grave a countenance that Lady Gylford had it in her heart to admit that almost he deserved to rank with his grandsire and the gentlefolk of King Harry's days. Having said it he rose to his feet and took his formal farewell with a grace and address which gained him the compliment of a permission to visit King's Welcome whenever he pleased, as Lady Gylford would always be cheerful to welcome him.

CHAPTER XVIII

A VISITOR TO "THE GOLDEN HART"

THIS way and that way it came about that on the same day that the Master of the Lesser Revels paid his visit to King's Welcome, Mistress Clarendra was seated upon a rustic seat in the flowery and fragrant orchard which she had made her favourite resort. It lay at such a distance from "The Golden Hart," beyond the flower gardens, beyond the vegetable gardens, that no glimpse of the fantastic land-ship was visible through its foliage. Here Clarendra loved to sit on a rustic seat and make believe she was in Arcadia.

Clarendra had now been, for some two weeks, the skipper of that most amazing vessel, "The Golden Hart," and proved once again, to her vast satisfaction, her pleasure in freedom to do as she pleased. If she could not persuade my lady Gylford to accompany her in her migration from King's Welcome to this land-ship, at least my lady Gylford was unable, save by protest of speech and glance, to prevent her from playing the bird of passage. There was nothing in the shift to offend decorum in the smallest particular. The master and the crew of "The Golden Hart" had quitted the ship and sought shelter elsewhere. Clarendra not only took with her her women, and such servants as she was pleased to choose from King's Welcome, but she was defended by the presence of the former Mayoress of Plymouth. Not indeed that she had much to defend herself against. Her only visitor was Master Hercules Flood, who came daily at his appointed hour and was received with all openness, and was punctually dismissed at the expiration of his promised sixty minutes. It was for those sixty minutes, enforced as they were, that Clarendra bore the man a grudge and was vixenishly resolved to be even with him. Nor did this seem a very difficult goal to gain.

Clarenda mused on all this as she sat in the orchard and carelessly turned the pages of her book, a certain folio which she had brought with her from King's Welcome. There were wisecracs in that day who inveighed, with a great disfavour, against the reading of books by women. They argued that the reading of books put ideas into their heads, though as books are presumably written for the purpose of putting ideas into people's heads, it is to be assumed that the wisecracs meant foolish ideas or false ideas or wicked ideas. For these same wisecracs the whole duty of woman was to housekeep and to mother, and other books than those of cookery and recipes were pernicious in their fingers. They looked sourly upon well-read women; asked cogently if the applauded scholarship of Lady Jane Grey had been able to save her from the scaffold, and heard with tight-lipped bitterness of her Majesty's Latinity and of her ability to crack jokes in Greek with learned doctors.

These critics would claim to have found justification for their strictures if they had been aware of Clarenda's immediate study. This was Pullingham's "Pageant of Antiquity," a folio devoted to "a new setting forth of the fables of the ancients, whereby the myths of Greece and Rome are made free of our English speech." Her fancy was most taken by the tale of Hercules and Omphale, because of the name of the hero who was made the butt and plaything of the dainty Queen. Her first thought was that it would have amused her greatly to stand in the sandals of Omphale, and make game of the good-humoured giant. Her second thought was that she might, in a measure, do so still.

Clarenda was so occupied with the learned Pullingham and with the thoughts his pages had inspired, that she was wholly unaware of the appearance of a man in her sanctuary, a man who was walking softly over the grass towards her, with a satisfied smile upon his face.

This gentleman had arrived at the gates of the place—which as he had learned on his journey was known to the neighbourhood as Flood's Folly—a few minutes before, and by taking it upon himself to assert that he came charged with a message from my lord of Godalming, and emphasising his assertion with the timely presentation of a gold coin, he obtained the knowledge of where Mistress Clarenda was,

together with the right to seek her there himself, while he left his nag to the care of the servant. Now as he moved along the grass to the seated woman he suddenly clapped his hands together and so aroused her attention. The girl lifted her eyes from her book, the girl shook her mind free from its meditations and she stared with astonishment at what she beheld. If a ghost had come softly gliding over the orchard grass towards her she could hardly have been more amazed than she was to behold Sir Batty Sellars, whom she believed to be in London and wholly ignorant of her whereabouts.

Clarenda sprung to her feet with a little cry of joy and ran forward to meet Sir Batty with a rapidity of motion and an eagerness of expression, which seemed to assure Sir Batty that he had done well to travel.

"You are very welcome, Sir Batty," she cried, "but what wonder brings you to Devonshire?"

"The greatest wonder in the world," replied Sir Batty, as he bowed low over her hand and touched his lips to it, "a wonder that surpasses all wonders in the past, in the present, and so I dare to prophesy, in the future—the fairest, rarest maid in England, Mistress Clarenda Constant."

Clarenda's cheeks and eyes warmed at the words of Sir Batty, for she dearly loved to be praised in courtly phrases, and she had perforce fasted from such sweet food of late.

"When I hear you speak so," she declared, "I seem to be out of my exile, and back again in my beloved London."

"But why are you in exile at all?" questioned Sir Batty. "What is the meaning of this mysterious departure, this secrecy, this rustic seclusion?"

"To know that," replied Clarenda, "you must question my lord of Godalming, and I am not very sure that he would choose to give you an answer. It is enough for me as a dutiful spouse-elect that he does so wish it. It is my place to hear and obey."

Clarenda made this speech with such an impudent assumption of demureness and obedience that Sir Batty laughed heartily.

"I am glad to see that exile has not changed you," he said. "The lumpishness of the country could not dim your beauty, and your wit is as lively as ever."

Clarenda seated herself on the rustic bench and motioned to Sir Batty to take his place by her side, a motion which he gladly obeyed.

"Now tell me, Sir Batty," she commanded, "how it is that you, whom I believed to be in London making love to all the maids of honour, spring suddenly from the earth here in Devonshire, for all the world as if you were Herne the Hunter?"

"The reason is," replied Sir Batty, with a tender note of reproach in his tone, "that so far from making love to all the maids of honour I am so roundly in love with but one of them that I could not endure her absence and never rested until I had discovered whither she had flown that I might follow her."

"I suppose," said Clarenda, "that you travelled first to King's Welcome, and that you heard there of this land-ship of mine."

"You are in the right," said Sir Batty, "and a very poor opinion my lady Gylford seems to entertain of your land-ship and of your choice of residence."

"My lady Gylford," said Clarenda, "may ——" She said no more for she did not exactly know how to finish her sentence at once prettily and civilly, so she just snapped her fingers roguishly and set Sir Batty a-laughing.

"But in all sweetness of simplicity," he asked when he had done with laughter, "how has it come about that you are quartered in this droll old hulk?"

"That is a long long story, much too long to tell," replied Clarenda, and immediately proceeded to spin him the whole yarn with great volubility. She told him of how she had happened upon the astonishing land-ship and how she had chanced upon its astonishing master, and of the amazing diplomacies that had ensued, and of the bargain that was hard to make. At first Sir Batty listened with a laughing face, but as the tale proceeded it gloomed and at the close he glowered.

"The fellow was insolent," he protested. Clarenda contradicted him with a smile.

"No, he was not insolent, only he spoke his mind blithely and was polite enough in his fashion. But he was mulishly obstinate. He would not sell. Neither would he hire. Natu-

rally the more he refused the more I longed and the more I persisted. At last the whimsical fellow said that his ship of a house was wholly at my service, upon one condition."

"Did the clown presume to make conditions?" asked Sir Batty, with a frown.

"He is not a clown," Clarendra assured him, "although indeed he is very far from being a courtier. He is just a fresh-faced, pleasant-voiced country squire, with something of a sea-gait, who is as obstinate as a dog with a bone. His condition was that he should be permitted to pay me a daily visit of an hour. It was plain that he was greatly taken with my graces."

"The uncouthest savage must be that," Sir Batty said blandly. But he was not at all pleased with the news he was hearing.

"Well," Clarendra continued, "I was so eager for my ship that was a house, or my house that was a ship, whichever you please, that I yielded to his conditions, and here, for a whole fortnight's compass I have lived like a mistress-mariner, and been worshipped by my honest skipper with a very wordless worship."

"Who is the fellow?" asked Sir Batty, with the anger gathering on his face in spite of his efforts. But Clarendra was so amused by the telling of her tale that she did not notice.

"I never heard of him, nor will you, for he has spent his life a-voyaging. His name is Hercules Flood. His age I suppose a skip or so over thirty."

"And does your seafaring swain," enquired Sir Batty, "know of my lord of Godalming?"

Clarendra pinked and laughed.

"I believe I omitted to mention my lord. For indeed Master Flood seemed so keen to pay me court—and all in the properest way of decorum—that I had not the heart to deny him, especially as there was no other tolerable man in the offing. I thought his foolishness would amuse me, but now I am tired of it."

"I believe you set yourself to make the oaf fall in love with you from the start," said Sir Batty, eyeing her quizzically, but with a rising anger in his heart.

"It may very well be that I did," Clarendra admitted. "His

air of placid insensibility to my charms piqued me to the course as much as my desire to punish him for the impudence of his proposal."

"I take it," said Sir Batty caustically, "that you soon found his insensibility dwindle."

"None too soon," protested Clarendra with a pout. "Here was a man who would sit with me for an hour at a time and question of London gossip, and listen to London gossip, with as much composure as if he were made of wood or I were made of wax and no better than a babbling doll."

Sir Batty murmured a suggestion to the effect that it served her right for handling such a sea-dog.

"But he is no common sea-dog," Clarendra protested, more in her own interest than that of her landlord. "He is no mere boor with no speech but the patter of the sea. He has a good voice; he is as neat in his person as any courtier, and he dresses in an inland fashion that would pass, at a pinch, in London."

"Shall we call this fellow the nonpareil?" Sir Batty asked, with a querulousness that he could not wholly control. Clarendra shook her head vigorously.

"Nothing of the kind," she cried. "The more he has of gentility the less excusable was his clownishness in respect to my charms. So indeed I resolved to draw him on, little by little, into such a steady increase of ardour as should end in his combustion."

"And did you succeed in this commendable endeavour?" questioned Sir Batty, with a sour smile.

"Can you ask?" she answered with a little frown. "Of course I did. I would languish a little and sigh a little and then laugh a little to find myself so sighing, and vow that I did not know what I would be at or what was the matter with me. And I would tell him love tales of London and the Court and put cases before him for his judgment."

"And how," said Sir Batty, "did he play his part in this Parliament of Love?"

"Something like an owl or a stockfish," the girl answered. "He would reply to my pretty themes as if he were considering some problem in mathematics. And yet——"

"And yet?" repeated Sir Batty.

"And yet," continued Clarendra, "there were moments when I wondered if the man were not in reality far less foolish than I took him to be, and if, after all, I were not playing too serious a part. But then a glance at his quiet unconcerned face would reassure me and stimulate my resolve to quicken him into life."

"This is a dangerous game," said Sir Batty sententiously, "for a man and a woman to play." He spoke as solemnly as if he had never held a hand in such a game in his life. "While each of the gamesters is firm in intent to trick the other, lurking fate always suggests a variation in the proposed ending of the play. Thus there is always a chance that the sham contest may turn to a reality for one of the players if not for both."

Clarendra was vexed a little at this suggestion. Already the influence of Sir Batty's presence was asserting itself upon her and twisting her towards mischief.

"No, no," she protested hotly. "The fellow shall be as much in love with me as I please to make him, but I promise you that I could never flicker an eyelid for him."

"It seems to me," said Sir Batty, "that you do this mountebank mariner a great deal too much honour."

"Good Lord, no," Clarendra cried, "I do but sport with him and laugh at him the while, very much as Mistress Una might have sported with her lion and very much as my lady Queen Omphale, of whom I read in this book here, laughed at his namesake, Sir Hercules of Greece. It is all for my diversion, I promise you."

"That is as it may be," made answer Sir Batty, "and that is all very well, but I still think that you do this sea-ruffian too much honour in having any traffic with him."

"Begging your pardon, Sir Batty," answered Clarendra, "I know my course and how to steer it." Sir Batty noted, with a suppressed smile and a suppressed frown, the highly developed imperiousness which Clarendra had gained from her unrestrained rule at King's Welcome. "If one covets a thing in this world one has to pay some price for it, and I pay a small price for 'The Golden Hart' in making a gull and a gaby of its owner."

"I marvel me that he makes no greater demand on your clemency," reflected Sir Batty.

Clarenda frowned. "I should marvel vastly if he presumed," she retorted.

Sir Batty was dubious on this point, but he made no attempt to give expression to his dubiety. Instead he took possession of Clarenda's hand, and after kissing it devoutly again held it, an unresisting prisoner, between his palms.

"This sea-wolf of yours is a fortunate varlet," he protested. "What would I not give to pass an hour in your company daily."

"You may do as much and more," Clarenda assured him briskly, for indeed she was scarcely less pleased to see Sir Batty than Sir Batty was to see her. "Do you purport to make any stay in this queer quarter of the world?"

"I will stay as long as you will suffer my presence," Sir Batty assured her. "I am resting near Tavistock with Mr. Willoughby, whom I do not think you know, and I am in the company of Mr. Winwood, whom I am sure you remember."

"To be sure I do," cried Clarenda gleefully. "It is no great ways to Tavistock, so you and your friends can ride over as often as you please and we shall have romps and junketings. Lord, I shall be glad to look upon courtly countenances again for, to tell you Heaven's truth, I begin to weary of my buccaneer."

"I should like to have a peep at this sea-mew," Sir Batty suggested. "He must prove a wild water-fowl."

"Why, so you shall," Clarenda promised. "Ride over tomorrow, you and your company, so that you be here for the hour before noon, which is the time when my dog-fish comes daily to plague me."

"What would he say," asked Sir Batty, "if he knew that you are a plighted bride?"

All this while he had been gently drawing Clarenda's captive hand by slow degrees nearer to him. He gave a sudden pull which drew the girl closer to him, and releasing her hand made as if he would put his arms about her. But Clarenda was too quick for him and slid to the farther end of the seat.

"My friend," she said slyly, "I think it is you who are forgetting that I am a plighted bride."

"I wish I could," said Sir Batty, and vouched for his sin-

cerity with a heavy sigh. He had instantly become all discretion again with the first hint of the girl's resistance. The sight of her had renewed all his eagerness, but he had always been able to bridle his desires when it served his interest to do so, and he was very sure that it served his interest now.

Clarenda silently wished that she could forget. Indeed for a while past she had been able to banish from her mind much thought upon her future destiny while she made the most of such sport as her strange case had given her. But the appearance of Sir Batty had sharply revived old memories and old inclinations.

"Is it settled when you are to be made my lady Godalming?" Sir Batty asked. He would not welcome, as Clarenda welcomed, any postponement of the misalliance. Clarenda shook her head.

"I know nothing of it," she answered. "My task is to stay in Devon until further orders. I seldom hear from my lord. Happily I am allowed to amuse myself, and I do."

After a little more talk Sir Batty rose to take his leave, renewing his pledge to ride over on the morrow and bring his friends with him. Clarenda accompanied him, through the orchard and gardens, past the land-ship, to the gate on the highway and waited with him while his horse was brought. When Sir Batty was in the saddle he leaned forward and took Clarenda's proffered hand.

"It has been a great joy to see you again," he said in a low voice. "I suppose that if I were to speak all the truth I should say too that it is a great sorrow, but the joy outweighs the sorrow in beholding one whose beauty can not only inspire the liveliest passion but also the most profound devotion."

In another moment he was cantering along the road. At the crossways he turned in his saddle, and seeing that Clarenda was still standing at the gate, he lifted his hat in salutation. In yet another moment he was out of sight and Clarenda returned to her dwelling with a graver face and a heavier heart than she had worn or borne for many a long day.

CHAPTER XIX

IN ARCADIA

CLARENDA woke with a start on the following morning, finding fear in her heart that the day from which she hoped to gain much entertainment might prove foully minded. She dreaded a presence of driving rain or the threat thereof in a lowering sky and a wailing wind. For she had dwelt long enough in the West Country to be aware that the rebellious elements had their fling there at times; that the savageries of nature asserted themselves furiously against the suavities and amenities of which for the most part the West Country folk discoursed, and that the spirits of inclemency were ever ready to kick up their heels on the morrow of some enchanting eve. But all Clarendra's misgivings were put to flight the moment that she had parted her curtains and peeped through her porthole upon the waking world. It was as fair a morning as ever had flooded the Devon plains and valleys with colour and filled the Devon air with fluent gold. It was a day of that temper on which the world seemed to grow young again all of a sudden and to banish with the radiance of its smile any memory or any prescience of black and sunless hours. So the heart of Clarendra sang in her sweet body.

She had planned a pretty little piece of affectation for the reception of her visitors. She made a comfortable couch of brocaded cushions and silken pillows upon the rustic seat in the distant orchard-close which she liked so well, and set a pile of books upon the grass hard by, and propped a lute carelessly near to hand. This was for the benefit of the gentlemen from London. For their benefit too, but with a special regard to her daily guest she had cunningly concealed behind a thicket certain objects that were to be used later. She had given instructions that when Sir Batty and his companions arrived they were to be bidden as soon as

they had dismounted to proceed straight to the orchard, to which sweet-smelling bower Sir Batty now knew the way.

When all these preparations had been completed, and it was close upon the hour when Clarendra expected the first of her company, she settled herself very restfully and cosily upon her well-piled divan, arranged her robe carefully to be at once graceful, alluring and decorous, and closing her eyes pretended to have fallen into a nap in the midst of her studies. There could not, as it seemed to her, be a daintier picture to present to the travellers than this of beauty drowsing and dozing away the slow-moving moments before their arrival.

But as in life an affectation often becomes a habit, so, too, a pretence may drift into a reality, and this came to pass with Clarendra. The lulling influences of the warm, still air, of the blended scents of fruits and flowers, of the noise of humming insects and chirping birds, exercised so potent a command upon Clarendra's senses that her make-believe of sleeping turned to reality and she lay deep in a sound slumber when the three gentlemen from Willoughby Homing drew bridle at her gate. And she was still asleep when her visitors headed by Sir Batty came through the trees to the clear space where the lady lay and dreamed.

Clarendra was in the midst of a dream in which she fancied that the Queen had paid her a visit and informed her that she had decided to marry Lord Godalming herself and to retire from the throne and make over her crown to Clarendra. As the Queen concluded her astonishing proffer the notes of her voice began to sound like the twanging of lute-strings, and gradually sleep lifted from Clarendra's mind and she was lazily aware that some one quite near to her was actually picking at the strings of the lute. She guessed, and rightly, that it was Sir Batty who had come upon her unawares, and therefore she still feigned slumber to learn what music might follow this prelude.

Sir Batty had indeed, on discovering that Clarendra was asleep, turned to his companions with his finger on his lips, and then advancing cautiously on tiptoe, he had deftly possessed himself of the lute. Rapidly touching the strings to prove that they were in tune he began to sing some rhymes he had composed.

"Heart of the heart of my heart,
Sleep while you dream of my name;
Wake, if you will, with the same
Word on your lips as they part;
Fanning my fire to a flame,
Heart of the heart of my heart."

As Sir Batty made an end of singing, Clarendra, who had all this while lain very still, lifted a hand and waved it to show that she was wide awake, and then shifting her position sat up and faced her visitors. She looked very radiant and dainty and gay, with her fair face flushed a little from her slumber, and her warm-coloured hair a little disordered from its nesting among the pillows, and a smile of pretty mockery curving her lips.

"Heaven mend you, Sir Batty," she cried, "I have better things to dream of."

"Then you must dream of ladies or angels," answered Sir Batty, "for I grant no man better than myself. But I admit some to be my peers and here are two of them, Mr. Spencer Winwood, who is already happy in being known to you, and Mr. Willoughby, who has only lived so long in the hope to attain that happiness."

Clarendra laughed as she quitted her seat and delivered to each of the gentlemen her slim fingers to salute.

"You are very welcome, sirs," she declared, "to this strange dwelling-place. What do you think of the whimsy of a ship on dry land?"

Sir Batty had already paid it his tribute of surprise. Mr. Winwood minced some nimble epigrams around it, as if it were a cold joint that called for a sharp companionable salad. Mr. Willoughby endeavoured to give utterance to his opinion that the thing was a foolish business but nobody heeded him and he abandoned the enterprise. Speech soon slipped from the land-ship to its fair inmate.

"You are sadly missed in the town," Mr. Winwood averred. "London is all sackcloth and ashes. Why did you give us the slip and leave us all widowers?"

Clarendra flushed at the term and sought refuge from embarrassment in pertness.

"There is but one man in London to be widowed by me," she said, "and he is not yet my husband."

"By the good leave of my lord Godalming," Sir Batty said, "who is in spite of his seventy summers the most enviable man in England, we are still and ever mean to be all your lovers."

Sir Batty was pleased to speak thus collectively to make the declaration more airy and general, but the boldness of the glance he levelled at Clarendon assured her that where he seemed to speak for others he spoke sincerely for himself. Mr. Winwood laid a cautionary hand upon his friend's arm.

"What would my lord of Godalming say if he were to hear you speak so free?" he questioned.

"Nothing, I think," Sir Batty answered, "for I would give him no cause of offence, seeing that he leaves this dear lady free to follow her fancies."

This talk about my lord did not please Clarendon at all. She had such kindly thoughts in her heart for the old courtier who used her so graciously and humoured her whims so generously and troubled her peace of mind so little, that somehow it vexed her to find his name a bandyball for these flippant gentlemen. Also she found that it was hard upon her, so young and fair, to stand there as it were pilloried as the promised bride of an ancient. And, from whatever cause, she found herself something softened and gentler since she came into the West Country. But she felt that it was due to her recognised sprightliness to betray no weakness. So she spoke with a smirk.

"Heaven bless the dear old gentleman, he gives me a large measure of freedom."

She hated herself as she spoke, for there rose before her mental vision a picture of the grave and stately elder as she had last beheld him in the Hall of the Nymphs, when he had made her the fair protestations which he had fulfilled so liberally. But she could not do other than laugh and banter in the company of Sir Batty and Mr. Winwood. Mr. Willoughby was, of course, of no importance in the matter.

But it irked Mr. Willoughby to be set of one side in this fashion, and moreover he had been so played upon by Sir Batty during the ride from Tavistock as to how he should carry himself and what he should say to prove himself the true man of fashion, that he itched to place himself in a

better light before so lovely a lady. So he spoke now with an air that he took to be very careless and debonaire.

"If he leaves you as free after marriage as he leaves you free in betrothal some of us will hope hopes."

He stuttered a bit as he uttered this sentence, and he turned very red and did not look at all the sad rascal that he desired to appear. But he did at least succeed in turning Clarendra's attention to him. She knew that it would be a waste of time and a waste of wit to be angry with Sir Batty or Mr. Winwood. But she guessed that it was a different matter with this rawster.

"The man is a fool who nourishes such hopes, I promise you," she said sharply. Even as she spoke she was sorry, for she saw that poor Mr. Willoughby was wallowing in a very slough of fatuity, so she swung a little away from him and addressed all three as if they were one.

"If you talk silly," she protested, "I shall dismiss you. I did not bid you here to be wooed or flattered, for I am somewhat cloyed of such diet. I take it that Sir Batty has told you something of the strange case which places me here."

Mr. Winwood nodded; Mr. Willoughby also nodded, but he had again fallen into oblivion and his agreement passed unheeded. Mr. Winwood spoke.

"Batty has told us of your astounding sea-calf, and we learn that you have promised to afford us a peep at him."

"He is a very good-natured monster," said Clarendra, "and I can make him do any mortal thing I wish save to seem like a courtier and a Londoner. To that pitch I shall never lift him."

"Pray tell me," said Spencer Winwood with a great air of raillery, "does this good gentleman sleep in the stables or the garden?"

Clarendra shook a protesting head with a pretty air of indignation.

"No, no, no! Do you think I have such a disdain for convention? He lies at some inn in the town yonder; the 'Dolphin' as I think. Thence he comes to pay me daily visits and to woo me with countryside simplicity."

"I am amazed," cried Mr. Winwood with extended hands.

"I am amused," added Sir Batty.

Mr. Willoughby looked as if he would like to say something but was unable to think of anything apt to say.

"He has used the sea so much," continued Clarendo, "and the civilities of cities so little, that his frankness is entertaining. He means what he says and he says it in plain straight words."

Mr. Willoughby began to murmur something to the effect that directness of speech was a merit in a man; then suddenly recollecting that this was by no means a theory befitting a would-be courtier he bit off his speech and was dumb again. Clarendo went on with her discourse without heeding him.

"There is no grace in the fellow, no daintiness of phrases, no pretty wit-words, not a chaplet of similes. He can stare with any man, but he has a voice to no purpose." She turned towards Spencer Winwood with a radiant smile. "Tell me now, Mr. Winwood, you who are an accomplished amorist, if you wished to please and praise a lady, how would you deliver her such a piece of sweet news?"

Mr. Winwood seemed to be much flattered by this appeal, for indeed, he was renowned at Court for his skill in the fashionable form of speech. He cleared his throat and replied briskly:

"Something in this fashion at a dash—'Excelling and excellent angel, if all the many coloured spangles of the sky were eyes that might gaze into the limpid well of my heart they would find Truth there, and the fair naked nymph would hold a golden book in her silver fingers whereon it should be written that the shepherd Strephon—whom the world calls Spencer Winwood—declares himself the happy vassal, the radiant slave, the eternal servant of the exquisite nonpareil, the incomparable paragon, the enchanting non-such, the adorable lodestar whom mortals name the divine Clarendo Constant.'"

Clarendo clapped her hands approvingly as Mr. Winwood ended with a profound bow. Mr. Willoughby gaped in a rapture of admiration and wondered if he could ever learn to talk like that. Sir Batty Sellars smiled enigmatically.

"Now there," Clarendo protested, "is a declaration worthy of a woman's ear. So, I'll be sworn, did shepherds woo

shepherdesses on the slopes of Parnassus and by the waters of Helicon. But my poor blockhead could never understand it, let alone attain it. Yet he is very sweet-tempered and yields to my humours most affably. Now, for instance, I have warned him that to-day we are to play at shepherd and shepherdess and I have made me a fitting provision of toys for the sport. I am sure I shall die of laughing and I know he will take my mockery all in good part."

"I protest," cried Sir Batty, "that I should love to see the show."

His comrades applauded, but Clarendra was for denying them.

"That would scarcely be fair," she said. "If I bait my bear for my own entertainment I should not plague him in public."

"Not in public," Sir Batty argued. "All we ask is that you suffer us to hide in all discretion behind yonder hedge-row."

"It is not kind," urged Mr. Winwood, "to deny us the satisfaction of beholding your yokel gambol."

"And besides," said Mr. Willoughby, finding his tongue with an effort, "we can pretend to have just arrived and you can pretend not to have seen us before."

This master-stroke of diplomacy was much commended by Mr. Willoughby's friends and had its visible effect upon Clarendra. Encouraged by his unexpected success Mr. Willoughby essayed again.

"If we do not see your bumpkin jump and tumble at your call, how are we to credit your tale?"

Now this was neither a happy speech nor a polite, yet it had its effect of angering Clarendra into a half mood of agreement. For she was very hotly resolved to prove her dominion over the big man.

"I am not given to falsehood," she said sharply to Mr. Willoughby, thereby covering him with confusion, for he had never meant to offend, "and I am very sure that his antics would amuse you."

She broke off, and shading her eyes with her hand gazed under its shadow into the distance. Then she pointed in the direction where Plymouth town lay its long way off and where the riband of white highway could be discerned afar,

for the orchard lay on a lower ground that declined to the fringe of wood and the lonely moorland beyond.

"See, even as I speak, where he comes," she said. The three gentlemen swung on their heels and training their glances to her index saw in the distance a small moving dark object that presently became a rider, galloping steadily along the country road. "Mark how he carries himself as gaily as if he owned the world."

"He sits his saddle mighty well for a sailor," commented Mr. Willoughby, who knew something about riding if he knew little about anything else. Sir Batty turned to Clarendra and pleaded in a beseeching voice:

"For pity's sake let us linger a little and peep at your fooling."

Clarendra looked undecided.

"Nay now, I may not," she began hesitatingly. Sir Batty looked keenly at her and said with deliberation:

"You seem to be strangely considerate of this fellow when all come to all. Perhaps the game is a more earnest game than you would have us believe."

Clarendra flushed hotly.

"Nay, if you think that," she exclaimed.

Sir Batty shrugged his shoulders.

"You have only to convince us," he said drily. Mr. Winwood put in his word. "Be clement and consent," he pleaded. "We entreat you upon our knees," Mr. Willoughby said, and plumped instantly down upon his, with so comical an effect as to set the whole party laughing. Clarendra was plainly yielding.

"Well," she said, albeit somewhat reluctantly, "if you will promise on your honour to be mute as mice, and to steal away softly when you have seen a few moments of sport, so that you can return and appear to be paying me a visit and to know nothing of the matter——"

"We promise," said Sir Batty, smiling, and his friends echoed the words.

"Well then," consented Clarendra, "you may linger a little behind yonder hedgerow and peep through the leaves. But you must keep very still and scarcely breathe and never whisper, for I would not let my poor giant know that I have made him a staring-stock. And now as he will be here very

soon, for as you see he is a swift rider, you were well to take your posts immediately."

Quickly the three gentlemen tiptoed it across the grass towards the barrier of the yew-tree hedge, behind whose shelter they ensconced themselves. After giving a rapid glance in their direction to assure herself that no hint of raiment or glitter of ornament betrayed their presence, Clarendon placed herself anew upon the pile of cushions and, composing the flow of her gown as gracefully as before, awaited the coming of Master Hercules Flood.

CHAPTER XX

A SHEPHERD IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

HERCULES FLOOD, galloping swiftly along the road from Plymouth to "The Golden Hart," was as cheerfully unaware that he was observed afar by London visitors as he would have been cheerfully indifferent to the fact if he had been aware of it. His thoughts as he rode were busy with Clarendia, and with the part that Clarendia had played in his life since the days when she visited his land-ship in her golden coach and he struck his fantastical bargain with her. It had taken him very little time to discover that he was enamoured of the damsel; it had taken him longer to assure himself that the maiden was worth the pains of wooing, and, if wooed, of course of winning. Hercules Flood did not admit that he could fail in an enterprise when once he had duly considered it and given his mind to its proper conduct. Wherefore in the beginning of his daily visits to the fair Clarendia he was very busy indeed with his study of the girl who had so greatly taken his fancy. For all that he seemed so eager about the London news he did not in reality care a fig for them, and while Clarendia in her heart was inclined to resent his tranquillity in the presence of her charms, he was growing daily more appreciative of their power.

In a word, Hercules watched Clarendia's proceedings with an observance that was none the less keen because it was so little patent, and with an interest that would have made the girl gasp if she could have been aware of it. He saw very plainly what she would be at, and after she had, as it were, proved her case to a certain point he was quite prepared to humour her fancy. From the first moment of meeting her he had been enchanted by her beauty, but because he had long ago learnt his lesson in the book of humanity he was at the easy pains to keep his feelings to himself. He read

her very imperious, a little greedy, somewhat cold behind her lively carriage. The first glance of her fine eyes assured him that she thought his proper place would be in the dust at her feet, and Master Flood had no mind for such soiling of his knees either mentally or physically. "If there is to be any wooing or suitoring between us," he had promised himself with an easy confidence in the strength of his pledge, "it is you, pretty lady, who shall show me the way and play the first card." So while Clarendra was blandishing her hardest he was allowing himself only the most gradual responses, though now and again it somewhat startled and even staggered him to find how ready he would be on a pennyworth more of provocation to clasp the girl in his arms.

Thus it came about that in this particular encounter of sex Hercules, who had accepted the dare in a girl's eyes with an amused determination to humour her faintly-veiled purpose, found himself growing daily more aware of the girl's beauty, more sensitive to the innocent impudence of her advances, more angrily conscious of her flightiness and yet more convinced that the heart of her was sound and that the soul of her was sweet. By imperceptible degrees and yet with exceeding swiftness the relations between the man and the woman had come to be established on the terms of a romantic playfulness which was the more dangerous the more one player made-believe. If Hercules was shrewd enough to read much of Clarendra clearly, he was too straightforward himself to realise that their relationship could be regarded by Clarendra only as no more than a kind of May game that the pair were playing. He could not have brought himself to believe that all her show of tenderness was no more than a show, or that she might have condescended to such malicious satisfaction for a foolish sense of pique. Knowing now that he was deep in love with the girl and being very sure that the girl was well aware of his passion, he took it for granted in his downright fashion that if she welcomed his admiration so gladly it was because she might be willing to reward it.

Therefore when the new Omphale diverted herself by devising all kinds of little impositions and tasks for her servant, the new Hercules, he accepted and obeyed her whims with a serenity of good humour which he believed to

be her due. He did not dream that his complaisance led the girl to believe that he was not merely simple-minded but a simpleton, and he yielded cheerfully to her caprices believing that all the while there lurked such a fascinating hint of kindness behind it all as seemed to compensate for her tricks.

All this sport of love-making had proved so strange and sweet to Hercules that he had been well content for a while to linger amidst its roses. He had been in no hurry to put an end to the pastime. He wished in his honest way to be quite sure of himself and to be quite sure of the girl before he ran his thoughts into words. Now he knew that he was sure of himself, and he believed that he was sure of her, and he decided that the time had come to voice his hopes. As he had taken an understanding between himself and the maid for granted, that only needed to be expressed to be ratified, so now he judged that the hour to ratify had struck. The term of Clarendra's tenantry of "The Golden Hart" was running out, and as he rode now through the fair June forenoon he made up his mind to speak.

It was his custom to visit "The Golden Hart" by a special way of his own. As Clarendra chose to give him audience in the orchard he did not make for the main entrance of his estate, but took a half circle around it which brought him to a small gate in its further wall which faced upon a fringe of wood and the stretching moorland. Here he dismounted, tethered his horse to a tree, and producing a key, opened the gate and entered the orchard.

Thus it was that he walked with complete unconsciousness into the trap that had been, more than half-accidentally, laid for him. Had he come by his own front door, he must have taken his horse to the apology for formal stabling that was built in below decks on the larboard of "The Golden Hart," and have found three unfamiliar horses feeding there. The which would have prompted inquiry and the information that strangers were in Mistress Clarendra's company. But he came by the back way and had no idea, as he closed the gate behind him, that there was anything momentous in the action. A few paces across the grass of the orchard close brought him nigh to the rustic seat and to the divinity it enthroned.

Hercules surveyed the seeming sleeper with a faint smile

which asserted his native intelligence. Then in a cheery voice that would have carried from one end of a ship to another, he saluted her with a lusty "Good morning."

Had Clarendia been really and truly asleep that jovial greeting would have aroused her. Even though she was only shamming slumber it caused her something of a start, and she swung round to a sitting posture with great rapidity and faced the speaker with something of reproach in her gaze.

"Good Lord," she grumbled. "How you startled me."

The smile on Hercules' countenance had been by this time widened to a downright grin.

"I do not think you were really asleep," he said coolly, "though I do not understand why you should feign slumber."

"There are many things in the world that you do not understand," retorted Clarendia. "But of course I was asleep."

Hercules shook his head with such an air of good-humoured incredulity as fairly exasperated Clarendia, for this was not at all the way she wished her sea-servant to behave.

"O monstrous rebel against all sentiment," she cried, "you should never doubt a lady's word."

"Not even when she is fibbing?" Hercules asked quietly, as he seated himself by her side.

"Then least of all, heretic," Clarendia protested, edging a little away from him in affected disdain. "You are very uncouth and it is truly a hard business to civilise you."

Hercules leaned back in his corner and surveyed her with curiosity.

"Why should you wish to civilise me?" he asked.

"Because I am a town damsel and no rustical sylph," Clarendia answered. "For my part I love town fashions, town manners, town habits, and town gallants to air and wear them. I would have you more of the mode, my savage. I would shape a Valentine out of your Orson."

Hercules did not seem to be impressed by the picture, or the damsel's wish.

"I have used too many seas and soils to prize trifles," he said sturdily. "I set my own fashion and follow it."

Clarendia made a grimace.

"If you wish to please me you must follow mine," she pouted.

"No, lady, no," Hercules answered simply. "It is my very dear wish to please you, but if I am to please you at all it must be as honest Hercules Flood and not as a mountebank, or the monkey of a mountebank. I make no doubt that your courtier may be a proper fellow enough, and so long as he has a man's heart it matters little what clothes he wears or what speech he minces. But his way is not my way, and I should look but a foolish daw in his fine feathers."

"Well, well, you shall be what you will," Clarendo condescended, "so long as you consent to play games with me."

"What kind of games?" Hercules asked, cheerfully, willing to humour her, but wondering a little what new foolishness she would be at.

"Country games," Clarendo answered, "Arcadian games."

"And what may those be?" Hercules questioned. Clarendo uttered a little shriek.

"Surely," she cried, "you are never such a wild man as not to have read that most mellifluous book 'Arcadia'?"

"I have little time for reading," Hercules admitted, "yet the name seems somehow to hum in my head. Who made the book?"

Clarendo stared at him in disapproval.

"How can you ask," she said. "Why, who but the young lion of Pembroke, Philip Sidney?" Hercules' face brightened.

"Philip Sidney," he said. "There was a true man for you. I marvel that he found time for such nonsense."

"It is not nonsense." Clarendo protested hotly. "Sir Philip did not think that, because he was a soldier and a sailor, it was beneath him to write finely as well as to live finely." She paused, suddenly recollecting that her immediate business was not a discussion on polite letters but the improvisation of a comedy. "However," she went on, "we shall not quarrel if only you will come a little ways into Arcadia with me. Arcadia has set the fashion to be pastoral, wherefore you and I must play shepherd and shepherdess."

"Such folk are simple folk," suggested Hercules dryly. "Do we kiss in our play?"

"Dear Lord, no," Clarendo cried, with a great affecta-

tion of horror. "It is the most if you touch my finger-tips. But you shall see that I am well prepared to initiate you into Arcadian mysteries, for here are our pastoral trappings."

As she spoke she sprang to her feet, and skipping to a neighbouring cluster of rose-bushes, dipped for a moment into disappearance behind them. Presently she emerged with a pair of be-ribboned shepherd's crooks in one hand and a tabor in the other, while a garland of roses swung on either wrist.

"Here are our implements," she cried to the astonished Hercules, "here are our pastoral belongings."

As she spoke she set her burdens on the seat, and picking up one of the garlands laid it daintily upon her tresses, while she caught up a crook and leaned against it with a provocative smile.

"Tell me, now," she questioned, "do I look like a true shepherdess with my roses upon my poll?"

Hercules surveyed her with a look of frank admiration.

"You are a wonderful lass," he avowed. "The roses do not make you more beautiful. It is you who beautify the roses."

Clarenda clapped her hands joyously.

"Why you could hardly have done better if you had been indeed a courtier," she cried. "But now it is my turn to see how you look in your rustic finery."

As she spoke she plucked the hat from his head and clapped one of the garlands, a little awry, upon his thatch of curling hair. Next she forced the crook into his right hand and made a lodging for the tabor in the curve of his left arm. Then she fell back a pace or two to look at the result of her composition, to which Hercules had submitted with the completest good-humour.

"By all the little sylvan gods," she asseverated, "you make as brave a shepherd as ever came out of Arcady."

Hercules surveyed his adornments with a smile.

"A shepherd seems foolish without sheep," he suggested, as he put the tube of the tabor in his lips and gave the bag a squeeze which sent a squalling noise across the orchard. Clarenda caught eagerly at his suggestion.

"I have thought of that, too," she exulted, "though the sheep may make the shepherd look more foolish still."

Once again she dipped a white hand behind the roses and withdrew it holding a fresh piece of treasure-trove. This time it was an effigy of a sheep, very woolly and very white, which stood on a wooden stand that had wooden wheels to it. It had a bow of blue ribbon round its neck and a long piece of blue ribbon to serve as a lead. It would have delighted a child, but it did not seem to afford much delight to Hercules as Clarendia put the ribbon into his hand.

"Now you are a perfect Strephon," Clarendia vowed, and dropped him a curtsey. Hercules stooped and patted the toy's shaggy sides.

"I have not seen so fine a sheep," he declared, "since I counted my height by inches."

"It is a fine sheep," Clarendia agreed, "and you make a fine shepherd to guard and cherish it. Now, shepherd, you must draw your sheep after you, and you must come dancing to me, a-playing upon your tabor."

Hercules gave the instrument a hug and made it squeal again very dismally.

"I fear me," he apologised, "I do not know how to play upon the tabor, but if you will give me freedom to use a boatswain's whistle——"

"By your leave," Clarendia insisted, "you must make the best shift you can with a tabor." She fell back a little and gaped at him in mock horror. "O dear god of gardens," she cried, "how clumsily you do carry your crook."

"Well," Hercules admitted, "to be honest with you, I would sooner handle cutlass or marlingspike."

"That is as it may be," snapped Clarendia. "We do not want such implements in Arcadia. And now, shepherd, you must sing me a song."

"Sing you a song," Hercules repeated, with a jolly laugh. "And why should I sing you a song, and on so fine a morning too?"

"As I have a soul to save," protested Clarendia, "I never came across any man so pitifully ignorant of the rules and customs of Arcadia. All shepherds sing songs to their

shepherdess, or to their flock if no one else be by, or to both, if both be in company, as at this present."

"You will be asking me to dance a hornpipe next," said Hercules, at which Clarendra frowned, for the dancing of hornpipes made no part of the Arcadian ritual, "but assuredly you shall have your will. You may have heard better singers, but none, I swear, more willing to please. But as I know no ditties about sheep, you must needs be content with a sailor's chanty."

With that he lifted up his voice and began to sing in a voice that was patently free from all serious training, but that was, nevertheless, a pleasant voice and a musical, with a rough virility about it and yet having a richness and sweetness withal that might have made it very agreeable hearing under happier surroundings. And this was his song:

"There lived a wench on Shooter's Hill
(Heave away, bully boys, heave away),
And I think that her name was Joan or Jill
(Heave away, bully boys, heave away).
Whatever she did, she did with a will,
And she loved to gorge, and she loved to swill,
So she ate her full, and she drank her fill,
And very likely she does so still
(Pull away, bully boys, pull away)."

Now it may have been simplicity, and also it may not, which led Hercules to vociferate a ditty so incongruous to his trappings. But from the first line it had the effect of forcing Clarendra to put her pretty fingers into her pretty ears, where she kept them until she could see by the stillness of her shepherd's features that he had made an end of singing. Then she withdrew her fingers, and with knitted brows addressed Hercules.

"Heaven and earth," she gasped, "what howling is this?"

"It is a sailor's chanty," Hercules answered, "that has lifted my spirits in many a hurricane. There are nine-and-twenty verses to it, each one better than the last. Will it please you that I go on with the business?"

"The Lord forbid," cried Clarendra. "Such a blustering snatch may be all very well in a hurricane, but here we lie in a calm, and your song is not to the purpose. How-

ever since you seem to be willing and may prove to be apt, I will be so good as to teach you a madrigal that is better fitted for Arcadian sweetness. Here is the song for which you should go to school."

She seated herself upon the bench and with her hands demurely folded in her lap and the most innocent expression on her face, began to sing, to a simple little lilting air, some silly words in a very fresh and tunable voice:

"My little sheep,
Awake from sleep,
And caper to my tabor:
Call, fleecy ram,
To woolly dam,
Like neighbour unto neighbour,
'Baa, baa, baa.'"

"Upon my honour," Hercules declared, "I like my song better than yours."

"That may very well be," replied the maid, "but it is my taste that reigns in Arcadia. So you must listen carefully and sing after me as like as you can compass."

Straightway Clarendra shifted to a singing voice again and began:

"My little sheep,
Awake from sleep,
And caper to my tabor."

Hercules, who really had an ear, caught the air quickly enough and echoed it:

"My little sheep,
Awake from sleep,
And caper to my tabor."

"Good, very good," Clarendra applauded. "Now for the rest of the stanza."

"Call, fleecy ram,
To woolly dam,
Like neighbour unto neighbour,
'Baa, baa, baa.'"

Hercules was really doing very well with his warbling, and when he came to the last line he repeated, with great

fidelity, the comic effect that Clarendra had imparted to the utterance of the triple Baas. What was, however, his astonishment when as his voice died away a great chorus of bleating arose from behind an adjacent yew-hedge. For a moment he was taken unawares and taken aback, and before he could rally his surprised senses to ask the meaning of the marvel, three gentlemen in rich habits came staggering out of their place of shelter and advanced with a rolling gait towards the spot where Clarendra and Hercules were standing, their hands clapped to their sides and their bodies rocking with laughter. Each of the three gentlemen was bawling "baa" upon "baa" as loudly as he could for the laughter that choked him between each utterance.

CHAPTER XXI

HERCULES TELLS A TALE

AS Clarendra turned towards the intruders she glanced at her shepherd's face and seemed to catch for the moment such a flash of fire in the sea-coloured eyes as startled her. But in a second the face of Hercules was as placid as if the unexpected interruption was the pleasantest, welcomest thing in the world, and he joined in the laughter and the bleating with a more dominant voice than the others.

"Baa, baa, baa," he bellowed, and laughed lustily in the intervals of his thunder. "Now are we all sheep together. But who be these rams that have butted out of the thicket?"

Clarendra was beginning to repent of her jest though she was pleased to find that Master Flood took it in such good part. Not altogether pleased, it may be, for she had no mind to admire a tame giant, but still on the whole pleased.

"For shame, sirs," she said to the three reeling gentlemen, "to come thus indiscreetly into our presence. You have no right to invade my quiet orchard unannounced." She turned to Hercules with a pretty air of apology. "These are some good friends of mine from London that love laughter dearly."

"Say no more," said Hercules with an air of unconquerable phlegm. "I am heartily of their mind. Nothing in the world is better than laughter, for it makes your dull liver jig. Will you not make these merry gentlemen known to me, for belike by and by we may all find occasion for merriment together."

Clarendra witnessed with some surprise and more disappointment the bland calm amiability of Hercules. She de-

cided that after all he was a clownish slow-witted fellow. The knowledge eased her mind, for if it did not hurt him to be made a butt of she had done him no hurt.

"Master Hercules Flood," she said, "this is Sir Batty Sellars, that has the honour to be the Master of the Lesser Revels at the Court of her most gracious Majesty. This is Mr. Spencer Winwood, son of my lord Bolton. This is Squire Willoughby of Willoughby Homing. Gentlemen, this is Captain Hercules Flood, one that has used the seas this great while."

Each of the three gentlemen as Clarendra named his name saluted Hercules with what Clarendra very well knew to be derisive extravagance, but which Hercules seemed to accept in the best possible part, as the customary demeanour on the presentation of strangers, and he returned the salutes of the mocking gentlemen so pleasantly that it was plain to the girl that he saw nothing amiss.

"You must forgive us, fair lady," said Sir Batty, addressing Clarendra, "and you too, Master Flood"—here he turned his head towards Hercules—"if we took you thus by surprise. But we were unaware you had company, and when we found this good gentleman singing we would not interrupt him until it was time to join in with his chorus."

Clarendra felt relieved that the episode had taken so tranquil an ending. It was truly no offence to bait one that took a baiting so affably.

"Well," she said, "now that we are all friends together, let us go within and feast."

The gentlemen from London seemed very ready to accept so pleasant an invitation, but Hercules interposed between them and their acceptance.

"I pray your pardon, lady," he said smoothly, "but as these blithe lords are so fond of mirth, I have a merry tale on the tip of my tongue which I will swear they should find diverting."

"Deliver it by all means, Master Flood," Clarendra accorded, but Master Flood shook his head.

"Alas!" he said, "my tale is a thought too skittish for a lady's ears."

Clarendra, who had no wish for a reputation of primness, gave a little laugh.

"Dear Master Flood," she asserted, "do not be bashful. We are not so prudish at Court."

But it seemed that Master Flood was not to be persuaded from his squeamishness.

"I cry you mercy," he said; "but you must forgive my quarter-deck modesty. My story is only for men's hearing."

Clarenda gave him a little sharp look of suspicion, but there was nothing in the open good-humour of his countenance to suggest that he meant anything other than what he said. There was patently no reason why she should not leave the gentlemen to themselves and their gay tales while she went within to prepare for their entertainment.

"Well, well, have your way," she consented, "and tell your tale. But do not linger too long over naughtiness. My patience does not endure waiting sweetly."

She dipped the company a sweeping reverence, rose swan-like from her squandered plumage and, taking to her heels, ran swiftly across the grass and was out of sight before the courtly gentlemen had done making their congees. When they had done they turned towards Hercules again, with their faces still inflamed with mirth.

"Your tale, honest friend," entreated Sir Batty, "your tale. If it do but prove as diverting as your ditty I swear I shall seldom have passed a better afternoon."

Hercules surveyed the three laughing gentlemen with a visage from which all expression seemed to be discharged. His deriders could read there neither surprise nor anger nor alarm. And if his face told them nothing neither did his speech, for he did not open his mouth to utter a sound. This singularity of demeanour had the effect of intruding a disconcerting element into the mirth of the three gentlemen. Sellars shrugged his shoulders and glanced from the impassive visage of Hercules to his companions, from whose faces the smile was slowly dwindling.

"I find our honest friend less merry than he pretended," he said. "The tale he talked of seems to stick in his gizzard."

Sir Batty's speech, with which his companions seemed to be in complete agreement, had the effect of lending some animation to the gravity of Hercules' carriage. He moved

very slowly up to Sir Batty and then, opening his mouth very wide, he blew a prolonged "baa" into his face. Then with equal deliberation he did the like in turn to Mr. Winwood and Mr. Willoughby.

The three gentlemen thus bleated on gaped at Hercules with nonplussed expressions as if they were at a loss how to carry themselves in this odd turn of affairs. The Master of the Lesser Revels voiced their annoyance.

"If that be your tale I care not for it," said Sir Batty with a frown.

Mr. Winwood and Mr. Jack Willoughby seemed to be wholly of Sir Batty's opinion. Hercules alone, of the little company, appeared to be unruffled and cleanly at his ease. Though he wore a fantastic chaplet upon his brows and though he carried a sylvan crook in his grip he wore his adornments so simply and unaffectedly that they seemed to blend harmoniously with his daily habit and he appeared less incongruous in his gear of sham shepherd than either of his three enemies in their point device of latest London.

"Yet it is told in your chosen language," said Hercules coolly, "for you pretend to be sheep. But I think it would be more natural for your magnificences to bray."

Sir Batty stared at the speaker in unfeigned amazement. He had so taken it for granted that the man was an abashable clown that he could scarcely credit undecption.

"Do you please to be impudent?" he asked with the asperity of one that commands a cur to heel. Hercules smiled blandly.

"How can you think so?" he asked. "Now you might call me impudent if I were to tweak you by the beard, flick you on the nose, or thus unbonnet you."

Even as he spoke, with great swiftness he put into action each of his suggested impudences, for he took hold of Sir Batty's beard and tugged it sharply, administered a stinging filip to Mr. Winwood's aristocratic nose and, with a dexterous back-hander, knocked Mr. Willoughby's plumed hat from his head to the grass at some distance from where he stood. These feats were performed so briskly that no one of the victims had the time to make an effort to prevent the impertinence.

Realisation of what had happened came soonest to Sir

Batty. In one second he had reddened furiously and then paled. In the next second his sword was out and he made a furious thrust at Hercules, who, however, lightly put the point aside with a twirl of his crook.

"Come, sirs, come," cried Sir Batty, in a white heat of rage, "draw upon this fellow, and stick him like a pig."

Winwood hurriedly put himself between Sir Batty and the imperturbable Hercules.

"Wait, wait," he cried, and then addressing Hercules questioned him. "Are you a gentleman?"

"I neither know nor care," said Hercules tranquilly, "for what you may mean by the term, but for me my gentility dates from the days when I served lieutenant to Francis Drake."

"The fellow is a buccaneer," cried Sellars; "but none the less he shall pay for his insolence. So have at him, one and all."

He made to push Winwood aside as he spoke. Winwood wavered and put his hand to his sword hilt. Willoughby, who had by now picked up his hat, shook his head.

"Nay," he protested, "I will have no share in a three to one scrimmage. Man to man I'll fight any fellow, but no mobbing for me."

Hercules yielded him a little nod of approval.

"You are the best of your bunch," he declared. "But it is all one to me how we settle our little difference. Come one at a time or all together, I care not."

"Come, Winwood," cried Sellars, "let us take the brag-gart at his word and charge him in company."

Winwood, accustomed to the dominion of Sir Batty, slowly drew his sword, but here the latent honesty of Mr. Willoughby revolted.

"I tell you," he cried, "that if you do I will fight on the other side, for all you are my friends and this fellow has unbonneted me."

He moved as he spoke to take a place by the side of Hercules and as he moved he drew his sword. Hercules smiled approvingly upon him.

"You seem a meritable fellow of a fashion," he said, "and it is a pity you keep such ugly company. But while I am grateful for your offer of alliance I cannot accept it,

and I must beg of you not to hinder but rather to encourage these gentlemen in their intention of double attack, as I should like to show you and them a little sword-play."

By this time Mr. Winwood had regained his familiar coolness, and took over the arrangement of the quarrel.

"Sir Batty," he said, "and you, Master Flood, I must entreat your patience. An orchard in a lady's neighbourhood is no place for a battle. The noise of our brawling might very well bring her to the scene, and, by my faith, we cannot slit one another's weasands under her nose. I confess, Master Flood, that you have had some cause to take offence, and I, for one, am ready to tend you the familiar reparation if you can but assure me that you have gentility enough to cross swords withal."

"As to that," replied Hercules calmly, "I can give you no better satisfaction. England was my mother and the sea my foster-mother. As for my father I cannot give you his name, but I have reason to believe that he was a proper man of his hands, and I thank him for a good measure of inches. Let me, however, suggest that if you do not find me gentleman enough to cross swords with, you should not have found me gentleman enough to affront. But if you stickle for the gentility of your blades, I am ready to defend my honour in honest country fashion with my naked fists or with a sound crab-tree cudgel, whenever and wherever it may please your dignities to appoint."

Mr. Willoughby's jolly face brightened at this proposal, for he was pretty nimble with his fists and was accounted as good a cudgel-player as any man in the West Country. He was not, indeed, anything like so big a man as Hercules, but he was big enough and well-knit, and he had not lived the town life long enough to put him out of condition. To Sir Batty the suggested arrangement wore a very different aspect. He was one of the most famous fencers in London; his name was cited with admiration in all the schools; and he prided himself on his command of his weapon. But in a bout of fisticuffs or a clatter of sticks he knew very well that he could only cut a ridiculous figure, and to be ridiculous were, indeed, a dreadful fate for Batty Sellars.

Mr. Winwood gravely acknowledged the kernel of justice in the words of Hercules, and taking Sir Batty by the arm, drew him a little on one side.

"What this fellow urges," he said, "has both shrewdness in it and reason. We have unquestionably given him cause for offence and if we refuse to accord him the reparation usual among gentlefolk on the ground that he lacks gentility, we cannot, with any great show of courage, deny his appeal to ruder weapons. Now I have it in my mind that none of us, save Jack Willoughby yonder, would play much of a hand with those same weapons."

Sir Batty, who was already at one with his friend in this conclusion, nodded assent. He had decided to waive any opposition to crossing swords with this sea-captain. For though he was by this time in cool blood again and carried himself with his usual courtly composure, he was within afire with rage at the tweaking of his beard and he calculated with infinite satisfaction upon the near prospect of running the tall fellow through the body.

He therefore agreed very readily to Mr. Winwood's proposition, and that gentleman, after exchanging a few words with Mr. Willoughby, who declared himself ready for any course of action as long as it were man to man, returned to where Hercules stood and leaned upon his crook like some gigantic Tityrus.

"Master Flood," he said courteously, "my friends and I are agreed that you are in the right of it and we are therefore fully prepared to offer you the honourable amends you require. As to the time and place we are very much at your disposal, but I believe you will agree that we had better let this day be out of our reckoning."

"I am heartily of your opinion," Hercules replied. "As for the time, how say you to to-morrow morn in the neighbourhood of ten of the clock."

Mr. Winwood replied on behalf of himself and his friends, that such an hour would suit them to a nicety, and renewed his interrogation as to the place.

"There are plenty of comfortable places for such pleasurable hereabouts," answered Hercules, "but I know of none better than Hazel Hollow, for it lies about midway between here and Willoughby Homing, and so will be of

equal access to all of us. Mr. Willoughby, I make no doubt, knows the spot well."

Mr. Willoughby, on being appealed to by Winwood, confirmed this assumption. He knew all Devon and Cornwall too, he asserted, like the palm of his hand.

"Then that is all settled," Hercules said, contentedly, "and nothing remains for me but to wish you good-day and good appetite. Pray lay my respects at the feet of Mistress Constant and assure her that I find that playing at shepherds yields very good sport."

"Will you not come with us," suggested Mr. Winwood, "that by your presence the lady may be assured that there has been no quarrel?"

"By your leave, no," replied Hercules. "I have come to the term of my visit and there is a busy day before me. I leave it to your assurances to pacify any qualms the lady may entertain."

He picked up his hat from the bench and then, taking the garland from his head, carefully ringed it around the crown of the hat. He saluted each of the gentlemen in turn, clapped the hat jauntily on his head and, with his crook over his shoulder, strolled leisurely to the little gate and passed through it, locking it behind him.

The three gentlemen watched him in silence until he was out of sight, even until they heard the galloping of his horse.

"There goes a proper man," said Jack Willoughby. "I could be friends with that fellow."

"He carries himself like a gentleman," said Mr. Winwood, "whatever his birth may be."

"What measure of height would you give him?" asked Sir Batty.

Mr. Winwood suggested some six feet. Mr. Willoughby, more precisely, was positive for six foot two. Sir Batty paced a length of some seven feet along the grass. "That would be about it," he said with a sinister smile.

Then the three gentlemen went in to the repast that awaited them.

CHAPTER XXII

AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY

HERCULES FLOOD took the saddle and the road with as cheerful a countenance as if he were riding to or from the best feast in the world. He assured himself, and rightly assured himself, that his temper was serene, that his judgment was unruffled, that he was still the same Hercules Flood who had awoke from the dreamless sleep of the healthy and vigorous man that same morning. But—yes, there was a but, beginning a mental sentence that ran somewhat thus. But there was a sense of soreness in his mind as there might be a sense of soreness in his body, if he had taken a toss from his horse and had scrambled to his feet to find himself sound in wind and limb, with never a strain or sprain or break anywhere, but withal a sense of physical discomfort, a bruised consciousness of the toss. He was no whit a worse man than he was before the misadventure, but the misadventure had happened and he was aware of it. So he did an unwonted deal of thinking as he rode, and as his horse's hooves clattered over the earliest cobbles of Plymouth town it seemed to him that he had arrived at a pretty definite decision as to his intentions.

He alighted at the "Dolphin" and delivered his horse to an ostler's charge. He waited to see that the animal was properly tended and fed before he ascended to his lodgings and placed his crook and chaplet in a corner. Then he quitted the inn, after leaving word that Griffith, who was abroad at the moment, should on his return await his captain at the hostelry. He proceeded on foot at a brisk pace along the Hoe till he came to the street wherein Philemon Minster dwelt.

He had not seen much of Philemon of late days. He had told his friends, at the beginning of his adventure, that he

had found a temporary tenant for "The Golden Hart" and that he intended for the time to take up his residence at the "Dolphin." He did not deliver the name or the sex of the tenant and Philemon forbore to question, knowing of old that it was the way of Hercules to tell what he wished to tell and no more. Of course it soon came to Philemon's ears, for such gossip blows briskly about a little town, that the new tenant of "The Golden Hart" was none other than the fair lady that had been visiting Lady Gylford, and he heard too, though not from Hercules, that his friend's horse often travelled the road to the land-ship. If Philemon felt something like a pinch of the heart as he heard the news, if he found himself a little envious of his friend's good fortune, he showed no sign of hurt or envy. It were folly, he told himself, to fret over the face of a girl seen once and once only. But the event pushed him back into one of his Puritan moods, and he avoided the "Dolphin" for a while and abjured sack and derived, or believed he derived, much cheer from the study of the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus.

Hercules came to a halt before the door with the carven portal, and finding it, as usual, ajar, climbed the stairs and without ceremony pushed open the door of his friend's study. Philemon was huddled in a chair, with his nose between the pages of a little paper book, but his eyes were not so occupied that his ears did not hear the entry. He swung his slender body round in his seat and, when he saw that the intruder was Hercules, he rose to his feet with a cry of joy.

"Hercules," he cried, before Master Flood could utter a word, "you are the very man I have been longing to see. Indeed I should have absolved myself of a vow of abstinence and sought you at the 'Dolphin' this afternoon, for I have a treasure to bestow upon you, my friend."

And as Philemon spoke he waved triumphantly the little paper book in which he had been reading. Hercules gaped at him with a questioning astonishment.

"Here is wit, here is wisdom," continued Philemon. "I have read it once. I have read it twice; I am even here at the third time. And now it is for you, and I hope it will tickle your spirits as it has tickled mine. Take and rejoice."

As he spoke he pressed the little paper book with enthusiasm into the unenthusiastic fingers of his friend. Hercules, without so much as glancing at the gift, thrust it into a pocket.

"It is not the poet Philemon that I visit to-day," he said, "but the man Philemon that can handle a sword as well as a pen. In a word I am come to solicit your company to-morrow morning for a very pleasant, lively and most unphilosophical disputation in the thick of the woods."

Philemon's face, which had darkened a little at the unceremonious reception which Hercules had given to his present, by which he evidently set much store, brightened again.

"Here is a good hearing," he said. "Tell me all about the matter."

"Nay," replied Hercules, "I cannot tell you all about the matter, but I can deliver you the pith of it. I have persuaded three pretty gentlemen to a parley to-morrow morn, wherein there is a likelihood that some scratches may be given and taken."

Philemon's face reddened with pleasure and he asked eagerly for an account of the matter.

"As to that," replied Hercules, "there is really very little to tell. I chanced to make the acquaintance to-day of a trine of gentlemen. Somehow or other, it is of little concern how, we fell out. One word brought on another word, till in the end there was no help for it but we must unravel the tangle with the points of our knitting-needles. Wherefore I have come to bid you to the play."

Philemon saw very plainly that the account his friend gave of the quarrel was very far from being the true picture. But also he knew very well that it was the only picture Hercules intended to present, and that he should get no other. So he took the tale with a grave face, expressed his delighted readiness to attend on the adventure, and cocked his eye at a long rapier that hung against the wall. Hercules was for taking his leave and had got as far as the door, when he suddenly turned on his heel and came back to his friend.

"By the by," he questioned, "did you ever hear tell of a book that is called 'Arcadia'?"

Philemon leaned back in his chair and laughed merrily.

"For very sure I did," he answered. "It is a brave book and a fair book and a gay book, and I love it dearly. I know many and many of a page of it by heart, which I shall be pleased to deliver to you if you care to hear them"—here Philemon paused for a moment to enjoy the wry face which Hercules made at the proposal—"or I will lend you the book itself if you choose."

Hercules shook his head with a very tightened expression of refusal about his mouth.

"I will not so far trouble you," he said, "though I thank you kindly, none the less, but I have little leisure for book-learning, and if one of my gentlemen were to spit me tomorrow it would be a thousand pities to waste so much time. But it amazes me much that good Sir Philip, whom I have ever found it allowed on all hands to be a fine soldier, could have found time for such trifles."

Philemon coloured again, but this time with as much vexation as he could ever bring himself to where Hercules was concerned.

"I would you were not such a Goth, dear giant," he protested. "What you are pleased to call trifles are to me the very quintessence of delight. But what I think of such things calls for little consideration. Let a better man appraise them. Let Philip Sidney defend himself."

He picked out a book from a row of volumes on a shelf near his hand and flung it to Hercules, who caught it in the air and looked at it with some curiosity.

"'An Apology for Poetry,'" he read aloud, "'Written by the Right noble, virtuous and learned Sir Philip Sidney, Knight.'" He looked at Philemon quizzically. "At least he makes but a small apology, which is so much to the good." He opened the book carelessly and cast a glance at random over the first page, and as he did so his visage brightened. "Now truly here is something to the purpose and well worth saying." Here he read aloud: "'He said soldiers were the noblest estate of mankind, and horsemen the noblest of soldiers.' Now that is very good as far as it goes, though for my own part I would write sailors for soldiers and name the master-mariners as the noblest of

the kind. Still it is pretty good as it stands and may go far to pardon Arcadia."

Philemon, who had been moving restlessly in his chair, vainly seeking an opportunity to speak, now seized his chance.

"Excellent Vandal," he cried, "do not pick lines at random and proffer them for Sidney's wit. If you will look closer you will find that those words which so please you were uttered by Messer Pugliano that was a Master of the Horse to the Emperor."

"He was a very sensible fellow," said Hercules, "and the Emperor was well served by such a man. You would not, I hope, have me believe that Sir Philip was of another opinion?"

"Sir Philip," said Philemon, with a weary smile, "proceeds to make a defence of an art which was very dear to him, namely the divine art of poetry, as it has been practised from the earliest times to the great solace, uplifting and entertainment of mankind."

"It has never solaced, uplifted or entertained me," Hercules rejoined, "and I pray you, most dear Philemon, that we say no more about it. I will call for you tomorrow with a commendable nag at an early hour. Till then, farewell."

He was out of the room and rattling down the stairs well nigh before the last word had fallen from his mouth. It was pretty plain that he feared lest his scholarly friend should persist in prolonging the argument concerning poetry. Philemon ran to the head of the stairs and called after him not to forget the little book which he had placed in his pocket. But Hercules was in the street by this time and making off at a great rate, and the words of Philemon were wasted upon indifferent air.

Hercules made the straight way to the "Dolphin," where he found Griffith awaiting him over a tankard of the strongest ale that its spigots could yield. Instantly a fellow tankard found its way to the table, and over its humming liquor the two friends put their heads together. Hercules was fluent with instructions to his companion, instructions that, it would seem, varied according to possible contingencies. Griffith were to do thus if such a thing happened,

and this if the happening were different. The Welshman listened with a solemn face to his chief's commands, sucking the while gravely at a pipe of clay. When Hercules had delivered his wishes Griffith nodded his head portentously to signify that he understood exactly what Hercules would have him do under each and all of the possible circumstances suggested to him. Then he finished his pipe and his mug and quitted his quarters to put the various orders of Hercules in train.

CHAPTER XXIII

WAGER OF BATTLE

EARLY the following morning Hercules Flood was cantering on a giant steed across the country to the place of meeting, with Philemon Minster and Griffith riding on either side of him. Philemon was a good rider in spite of his infirmity, which he had but to shorten a stirrup to counteract. But Griffith, though he clung like a burr to his steed with the grip of his powerful legs, was very patently the sailor on horseback over whom popular humour has always been pleased to make merry. He rolled and lurched a good deal in his saddle; he bobbed a good deal over the animal's neck, and the expression on his swarthy countenance, enforced by the imprecations that were from time to time jolted from his lips, made it very plain that the sturdy Welshman was far from enjoying himself.

The anger of Griffith did not afford a more marked contrast to the habitual composure of Hercules than did the bearing of Philemon Minster. He was in the top of high spirits, cracking jests, singing snatches of song, talking incessantly with an exuberance of gaiety.

Excitement always played upon his delicate and febrile nature as the breeze plays upon a wind-harp, moving it either to an extravagance of mirth or an extravagance of melancholy. For weeks he had been Puritan, austere, isolated, deep in his books, denying himself wine and company, striving to shut from his mind the loveliness whose fleeting vision he had tried to imprint on paper. Now he seemed to have swung into the flood-tide of rapture again, to be alive and alert and cheerful, merry with the wine of life, ready to be merry with the wine of the vine. He felt like some king's son that has been thrust out of his kingdom and rides at all adventure to better his fortunes. He was as one that having lost much has little left to lose and is

ready to stake that little with a light heart on any cast of the dice. Let Hercules prove the man; at least, so Philemon assured himself, he, Philemon, would prove the careless man.

Had Philemon but known it, Hercules was far from harbouring a happy mood that morning. He was forced to admit to himself that he had been hoodwinked, to put it pleasantly; that he had been fooled, to put it less pleasantly. And though he was never one to make a fuss over petty discomfitures, this rebuff was in the nature of a major ill and he felt that his scheme of things needed reordering. And already he was doing his best towards the readjustment.

Hercules had arranged, with his customary forethought, that one of his men should be at the place of meeting before the appointed hour in charge of a horse and cart. "One may ride or walk to a match," he said to Philemon, "but one never knows how one may travel back again." And when Philemon retorted with confidence in his friend's skill of fence Hercules had shaken his head.

"The best sworder in the world—or rather he that counts himself or is accounted the best—may meet a better. For his weapon may break at close quarters, or he may get the sun in his eyes, or his foot may slip or his confidence may betray him into carelessness—a thousand things may happen to spoil his game. For my part I always assume in any encounter that my opponent is like to prove the better man until I am assured to the contrary."

"You talk as if you were the most cautious man in the world," said Philemon and laughed, but Hercules accepted the words quite gravely.

"I hope I always act as if I were the most cautious man in the world," he said. "I have seen more than one good fight lost for want of caution—want of caution in the setting about I mean, for you have other things to think about when you are in the thick of it."

As Hercules and his companions approached the meeting-place they descried in the near distance three cavaliers who were riding rapidly towards them.

"Good," cried Hercules, slapping an applauding hand on the horn of his saddle, "our covey keeps time very com-

mendably. With any luck we should be done with the business inside the hour."

"Behold," said Philemon, "they have made no provision against ill-luck."

"So much the unwiser they," said Hercules, "it is only your fool who thinks he carries victory buttoned in his pouch."

The three drew bridle by the side of Hercules' cart, which they found duly awaiting them, and confided their animals to the care of its driver who tethered them to the tail-board. Then they walked slowly into the clearing that was to serve for their theatre. As they did so the gentlemen from Willoughby Homing had dismounted and, after fastening their horses to convenient trees, proceeded in their turn over the turf till the two parties faced each other.

Hercules and Sir Batty detached themselves from their companions and gravely saluted one another. Hercules indicated his friends with a sweep of his arm.

"These gentlemen have consented to act as my seconds," he said. "Allow me to present to you Master Philemon Minster of Plymouth, and Master Griffith ap-Owen of Cardiff in particular, and everywhere in general, but latest from the dry Tortugas."

All the persons saluted each other very formally.

Sir Batty addressed himself to Philemon with a great air of urbanity.

"Are you," he asked, "by chance of kin to the Minsters of Colchester?"

Philemon bowed.

"Sir Charlton is my first cousin," he replied, and Sir Batty nodded approval.

"I have the happiness to be acquainted with your cousin," he said affably; then turning to his companions he presented Philemon to each of them in turn. Thereafter he addressed himself to Griffith.

"Have I the good fortune," he asked, "to possess any knowledge of any of your family?"

"I cannot tell you for sure," replied Griffith dourly, "for it is many a long day since I have come across any of my kin, but as I remember, they were mighty particular in the

making of friends. My father, Heaven bless him, received the honour of knighthood from her Majesty long since, but set no great store by the dignity, seeing that he was himself directly descended from Peredur, that was King of Wales in the days of Uther Pendragon."

Sir Batty did not permit himself the shadow of a smile at this magnificent pedigree. Nor did he think it imperative to raise any question of the genealogy. Having consented to accept Hercules as a foe to cross swords withal—and at the cost of precision he was very glad to have accepted him—it did not seem worth while to make any difficulty as to the friends that he might choose to bring into the field. Wherefore he presented Griffith ap-Owen to his own companions with as much gravity as if he were able of his own knowledge to endorse his aristocracy, and presented them in turn to the Welshman who doggedly refused to be softened in the least by Sir Batty's urbanity.

When these preliminaries had been satisfactorily accomplished, Sir Batty cast a critical glance upon the massy bulk of Hercules and decided to a nicety the precise point at which he would deliver him a fatal thrust through the body—for Sir Batty was not squeamish when he was irritated, and human life, always excepting his own, was of little value in his philosophy. Then he surveyed the space of earth where they were standing, and swiftly decided upon the precise spot where he would give his enemy his death-blow. Sir Batty hated Hercules with all the energy of his being. He had affronted a stronger man than himself and had been tweaked by the beard for his insolence. That was bad. What was worse was the thought that this strong fellow desired Clarendon.

"Sirs," said Sir Batty, who took upon himself as by right of recognised Court officialdom the arbitration of the encounter, "we have here a very pretty quarrel, a very pretty place of meeting, and very pretty company for the business. As I understand the matter Master Flood has challenged me and both my friends and I and both my friends have accepted his challenge. The point to be decided by the laws of chivalry is, which of us has the prior claim upon Master Flood's person, if and when Master Flood is prepared to renew his defiance."

Hercules listened to this little oration with a face as expressionless as a wall. Griffith only glowered. There were many things that he would like to say, but nothing that it seemed polite to say. Only Philemon spoke. He moved a little forward, concealing his infirmity as well as he could and addressed himself to Sir Batty. He spoke as if of his own proper motion, but what he said had been arranged by Hercules.

"Here in England," said Philemon in his measured, pleasant voice, "we are not very much given to settling disputes at the point of the sword, partly it may be because we have generally some better use for our weapons than slitting one another's throats or splitting one another's livers. Wherefore we are often at a loss how to carry ourselves when such encounters arise. But in France, where I have sojourned a good while, all the particulars of an encounter are tabulated to a nicety, and one of their customs is that where a gentleman and his antagonist come into the field, each accompanied by his seconds, it is the usual thing for those seconds to fall to on their own account, one side with the other."

As Philemon spoke a certain gloom and sullenness overcame the countenances of the gentlemen from Willoughby Homing, each of whom was heartily eager to settle accounts with Hercules. But the sequent speech of Philemon dissipated the cloud.

"In this instance, however," he continued, "my friend and principal, Master Hercules Flood, insists upon his right to take each of you gentlemen in turn, which unfortunately deprives my friend here"—he indicated the glowering Griffith—"and myself from having the active share in the morning's amusement which we had anticipated. Since, however, Master Flood is obdurate we can but yield to his conditions. The only question now remaining for us to settle is, which of you three gentlemen has the prior right to his consideration."

Here Sir Batty was about to assert vehemently the urgency of his claim, but Philemon with a graceful elevated hand restrained him.

"It has seemed to me," he went on, "after carefully weighing the matter, that it would be difficult indeed to

decide this point. While I need not recapitulate the various acts of Master Flood which have led to this pleasant encounter"—here the three gentlemen from Willoughby Homing looked very angry—"I think I may go so far as to say that each of them is of about equal gravity. I therefore beg leave to propose that we draw lots for the first encounter with Master Flood."

The party from Willoughby Homing agreed with great promptness to Philemon's proposal, and the formality of battle being thus satisfactorily arranged the next question that arose was as to the method of giving precedence. Mr. Willoughby characteristically suggested the tossing of a coin. Philemon Minster, student-like, favoured an alphabetical arrangement. Sir Batty and Mr. Winwood, who were much of an age, urged priority of years as a prevailing claim. Griffith had no suggestion to make. Hercules with his habitual decision settled the matter.

"Let us settle the question," he said, "by drawing lots with three bits of paper of different lengths."

The rest of the company looked at one another in some perplexity.

"Which of us has got any paper?" Sir Batty asked. Mr. Willoughby was about to suggest broken twigs or blades of grass, when Hercules answered Sir Batty's question.

"I have," he said, and plucked from his doublet the little paper book which Philemon had given him on the previous day and which he had forgotten all about until that instant. He tore off its entitling cover without regarding it, and thrusting the leaves of the pamphlet back into his bosom, tore from the cover-page three strips of different lengths. These he handed to Mr. Willoughby, begging him to hold them in his hand while Sir Batty and Mr. Winwood draw in turn. The result of the draw was that Mr. Willoughby retained the longest piece, which gave him the first right, that Sir Batty came next, and Spencer Winwood last.

Philemon and Mr. Winwood performed the preliminary ceremonials duly expected of seconds. They examined the rapiers of the combatants, studied the lay of the ground and arranged the positions of the antagonists so that they should, at the start at least, be as satisfactorily placed in the matter of light as might be. When all this was settled

they drew apart as did Sir Batty and Griffith and the business of the morning began.

The encounter between Hercules and Jack Willoughby was of exceedingly brief duration. It was plain from the beginning that however much or little of the art of the duello Hercules might know, Master Willoughby knew practically nothing. He was evidently floundering, as he fought, through vague memories of incomplete lessons acquired during his sojourn in London, and when very presently Philemon observed a widening stain of red upon the breast of Master Willoughby's shirt, he sprang forward and called the combatants to a halt. Master Willoughby's wound proved upon examination to be no more than a scratch. The point of the sword had planted upon its mark with precision enough to draw blood without inflicting anything that could be seriously called an injury.

"Gentlemen," said Philemon, "blood has been drawn. The quarrel is trivial. Surely honour is satisfied."

Hercules instantly protested that, with the consent of Master Willoughby, he would rather choose that the matter went no further and Master Willoughby cordially agreeing the score between this pair of antagonists was declared to be wiped clean. Then Sir Batty, after asking and receiving assurances that Hercules was not in the least fatigued by this preliminary brush, took his place with great precision and an emotionless face, opposite to Hercules.

Hercules had entertained some considerable measure of curiosity as to the manner in which Sir Batty would conduct his attack and his curiosity was not long left unsatisfied. During all the prologue of negotiations Sir Batty had carried himself with a fine air of polite indifference and now when the time came for him to take his station opposite to Hercules, he did so with a carriage of exceeding gravity and made his salute with a slowness and precision which argued a cool and methodical player. But the instant that the salute was completed, Sir Batty's manner changed with astonishing swiftness and the weapons had barely met when he was leaping fiercely at his antagonist, beating at his blade with unexpected strength and aiming a vicious lunge at his breast.

If Hercules Flood were ever a man to be taken unawares that shrewd and swift assault would have put a period to his career. But he was no such man. He had learnt from his youth to be wary at all seasons, and this habitual wariness defended him easily against Sir Batty's attack. Sir Batty after hammering at his opponent's blade had sought to quit it too rashly. Expecting to find one inferior to himself in the manage of the rapier—a very justifiable expectation—he had acted without his usual prudence. His blade which he had extended in the confidence that he was about to bury it in his enemy's flesh, found itself met and countered by a binding parry, executed by Hercules, who instantly following this act by a rapid extension, transfixed Sir Batty's right arm just below the shoulder. Sir Batty's sword dropped on the grass from his suddenly unnerved fingers; his streaming blood soaked his shirt with crimson; the encounter seemed over before it had well begun.

But Sir Batty, heedless of his hurt, stooped nimbly and picked up his sword with his left hand; then fell anew into position.

"I am trained alike in both hands," he cried, in a rage of disappointment that even his self-command could not conceal, "let us go on with the game."

Hercules, who had instantly lowered his point after disabling his adversary, shook his head.

"I am as left-handed as you please," he said, and as he spoke he shifted his rapier rapidly from his right hand to his left, and made such motions with it as proved his command, "but it is ill fighting with a running wound, and I advise you to make an end."

Sir Batty's only reply to this counsel was to make an attack upon the speaker at once so fierce and so skilful as to justify his claim to left-handed dexterity. Hercules felt himself obliged to make good his own claim, and after a few seconds of give and take it pleased him with a sudden bind of his blade to nip Sir Batty's sword from his fingers and jerk it to a distant part of the field.

To Sir Batty, paler from mortification than from loss of blood, Hercules spoke.

"I could have run you through the body then," he said,

"but I preferred to disarm you. Let me beg you to make an end for to-day, seeing that you are so heavily handicapped. If it so please you we can renew our argument hereafter, when and where you will. But for the time being let us break off."

Sir Batty nodded assent. Indeed it were useless to contradict or to attempt to continue the contest. He had faced a better man than himself and had been worsted in a conflict where he had counted most confidently upon victory. He was in pain both physically and mentally and both sensations were unfamiliar to him in an affair of arms where hitherto success had invariably and faithfully attended upon him. He was silent from chagrin. Hercules, with a gesture, summoned the others.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Sir Batty has received something of a hurt and it were well that it should be swiftly tended and that he should be conveyed, as speedily as may be, to Willoughby Homing."

The words of Hercules were immediately confirmed. For even in that instant Sir Batty lost grip upon himself, lurched forward and would have fallen to the ground in a swoon if Hercules, who had kept an eye upon him, had not caught him in his fall.

"It is nothing," said Hercules composedly to the four who gathered about him, "I know enough of surgery to handle this hurt."

While he spoke he had propped the senseless Sir Batty on his knee and ripping the wounded man's shirt from wrist to shoulder with his knife, cut away the severed linen and converted it very nimbly and featly into a bandage for Sir Batty's injury, while the others watched his efficiency with admiration. When he had done he lifted his head and glanced at Philemon.

"It is a good thing," he said, "that we brought that cart with us. It would be no pleasant business for Sir Batty to ride back with his arm in this pickle. You, Griffith, and you, Mr. Willoughby, take the gentleman and convey him as gingerly as you may to the waggon."

While the pair were obeying his instructions Hercules turned to Mr. Winwood.

"You and I, sir," he said, "have come to our turn. Is

it your wish that we shall play it out or shall we call quits without further ado?"

"I am at your service," said Mr. Winwood politely. He had no doubt in his mind as to the result of the encounter after what he had seen of Hercules' skill.

"I must needs inform you," said Hercules, "that I have lived not a little in France, and some of her customs seem good to me. It is one of these customs that in a combat of this nature the man to whom it has pleased Providence to grant a win has the right to demand and bear away his opponent's sword as spoil of conflict. This is a right I wish to claim in this business."

As Hercules spoke he walked to the spot where his wrist-play had jerked Sir Batty's rapier and picking up the weapon confided it to Philemon before returning to Mr. Winwood.

"I am aware of the custom," said Mr. Winwood, "but if you desire to enforce it I must do my best to retain my weapon."

As he spoke he fell on guard. Hercules with his sword still lowered addressed him again.

"I should be loth to think that you came to grief over so paltry a quarrel," he said. "Will you therefore agree that if I plant a prick plumb in the middle of your forehead you will consent to consider yourself as worsted without further strife?"

"I agree to that," said Mr. Winwood and the pair crossed swords. A few seconds later Mr. Winwood sprang backwards as the point of Hercules' weapon touched him on the forehead, just between the brows. The touch was so light that the skin was no more broken than if it had been assailed by a pin, but the touch had been there and had made itself known. Mr. Winwood immediately took his rapier by the blade and extended the hilt to Hercules.

"You have won the game," he said, "and here are the stakes."

Hercules took the sword from him with a bow.

"I have a private reason," he said, "for pressing this privilege, as a proof, elsewhere, that in a quarrel which I think you will admit was forced upon me, I carried myself with honour."

Mr. Winwood bowed his head.

"I must assure you, Master Flood, that everything in your conduct this day has proved you to be a most honourable and admirable foe. Speaking only for myself I tender you my regrets for such share as I had in seeming to offer you any discourtesy."

The two men saluted gravely. Mr. Winwood turned and went his way towards the cart, whereon by this time Griffith and Jack Willoughby had installed Sir Batty on an extemporised bed of riding-mantles.

Here Mr. Willoughby, on the demand of Hercules and by the advice of Mr. Winwood, who assured him of the correctness of the proceeding, surrendered his sword. Hercules Flood tucked the conquered blades under his arm and walked at a leisurely pace, whistling softly, to the spot where the horses of his party were tethered and waited there until the wain which his forethought had provided started on its journey to Willoughby Homing with its escort of Sir Batty's two friends. When Philemon and Griffith rejoined him, he swung himself lightly into the saddle of the huge horse that carried him.

"Friends," he said, "I thank you heartily for your help in this business and I would that I could entertain you presently according to the rules of the game. But this must be for the moment postponed seeing that I have pressing business elsewhere. You, Griffith, know what you have to do and where to await me. And I hope, Philemon, that our next meeting may be under less bellicose conditions."

As he spoke he urged his horse into a gallop and in a few minutes was out of sight, while his two friends followed in his track at a more leisurely pace.

CHAPTER XXIV

EXIT OMPHALE

WITH the dawning of the day that followed upon her little experiment as Omphale, Clarendia became conscious of a certain somewhat uncomfortable feeling that she had not enjoyed her jest so heartily as she had anticipated. She found herself wondering if by any chance Master Flood might have felt himself aggrieved by the pleasantry and in consequence have taken offence. In such a case it were very possible that he might not pay her his daily visit, and Clarendia discovered, alike to her surprise and chagrin, that she at once regretted and resented such a possibility. She had so come to regard his visit as part and parcel of her daily routine that she did not realise how much it really meant to her until she began to fear that its continuity was threatened. Also she had so absolutely taken for granted the sailor's complete and unquestioning subjection to her charms that the thought of any rebellion, no matter how naturally provoked, exasperated her exceedingly. All that she had been able to learn on the previous day from her three guests from Willoughby Homing was that Master Flood had told them a merry tale that was not repeatable to a lady's ear and that after sending his humbler duty to her he had gone his ways very light-heartedly.

She began to fear now that the sailor-man might be huffed by her impertinence and refuse to return to her thrall. But yesterday she would have assured herself that such a course on his part would very well content her, but now she realised that it was quite otherwise, and that she was as hot to see him as she had been cool. To such a pitch did she permit her anxiety to mount that she despatched a servant on horseback to the town to seek out Master Flood at the "Dolphin" and acquaint him that Mistress Constant

expected to see him that morning as usual. The servant returned in an hour, that seemed a long one to Clarendra, with the news that Master Flood was not to be found at his lodging. He had risen early, so the landlord had said, and had gone abroad without leaving any word as to where he was going or when he would return. He was accompanied, it seemed, by his mate, so the landlord opined that he might be going to visit his ship, but this was a mere conjecture, offered for what it was worth.

With these tidings Clarendra was compelled to seem content, but it left her very discontented. She was burning to know in what spirit he had taken her yesterday's trickery and what feelings he entertained towards the fine gentlemen who had laughed at him. Earnestly she hoped that he had not taken offence and would keep tryst as usual, to solace her curiosity and ease her disquiet.

She was still a prey to anxiety and agitation when the hour drew nigh at which Hercules Flood was wont to pay her his daily visit. She made up her mind that she would repair to the orchard close as if nothing out of the way had happened and wait there for his coming, as if his coming were to be taken for granted. After all, she asked herself, in the hope of convincing her uncertainty, why should it not be taken for granted? A harmless jest is not matter grave enough to disturb an ardent wooer. So to the orchard she went and to the rustic seat, but this time she did not feign sleep, but sat awake and alert with straining ears to hear if her familiar victim returned to his chains.

As it neared the stroke of the hour when Hercules Flood should make his appearance, her face suddenly lightened, for she heard the familiar galloping of a horse's hooves upon the high road by the moor. She thrilled with a sense of triumph at the thought that Hercules was returning to his allegiance and that he would very soon be standing before her.

In a few minutes he was indeed standing before her and she glanced up from the book that she had been pretending to read that she might give him greeting. But there was an unfamiliar expression on his face which checked the condescension of her smile. It was not anger or reproach that she read there; anger or reproach she believed

herself royally qualified to strive with and to subdue; indeed, his habitual good-humour still reigned in his face. But it seemed to reign there with a new decision that surprised her, which might even have alarmed her if for a moment she could admit to herself that there might be anything alarming in the bearing of her slave. In her quick survey of him she noted that he carried behind his back one hand, as if it held something that he wished to conceal from her. He noted her observation, and smiled.

"Lady," he said, "I bring you these tokens from certain of your friends who will scarcely be able to wait upon you to-day."

As he spoke he brought forward his right hand and flung three naked swords at her feet. A sudden terror seemed to contract her heart.

"What is this gift?" she cried, and she knew that her voice shook as she spoke in fear of some catastrophe she did not dare to guess at.

"Those," replied Hercules composedly, "are the swords of Sir Batty Sellars, Master Winwood and Master Willoughby."

Clarenda sprang to her feet with a cry, her strained face staring at him.

"My God, have you killed them?"

Hercules shook his head.

"No, no, it takes much to make me want to kill any man; more than they did, very surely. My dignity is not of so ticklish a quality that it must cleanse an affront with heart's blood."

"Sir Batty is alive?" said Clarenda slowly. His was the case that most concerned her. She was very pale still and she trembled a little, but her self-command returned.

"He is alive. He did his best to kill me, in no very honourable manner and I could have killed him as easy as you please, but he is alive and with no worse mischief than a prick in the shoulder. He may keep his bed for a little, and there for the time let us leave him, for we have better stuff to chew. It is you and I now, lady."

He spoke with a quiet steady earnestness that perplexed Clarenda. She was honestly shocked at the result of her

folly and wished the ill undone. Now she forced herself to laugh as she spoke.

"Lordamercy, Master Fire-eater, do you want to cross swords with me?"

"No," answered Hercules composedly, "nor to cross wits with you, for you would prove too sharp for me. But there is some thick air between us which it were well to clear."

"I do not understand you," protested Clarendra disdainfully, though she understood him very well.

"You shall very soon," Hercules promised. "Just a plain say and a plain way. You allowed me to woo you."

"That was very gracious of me," said Clarendra carelessly, but her heart was not as flippant as her voice, and she hated the coming explanation.

"Also," he went on without noticing her remark, "you allowed me to fancy that you were well-nigh won."

Clarendra commanded a burst of laughter in the midst of which she cried out, "You are a vain ape." Then she fell to laughing again. Hercules waited quite patiently until she chose to cease. Then he put her a question.

"Were you making a fool of me?"

Clarendra started laughing again, but this time her laughter came readily enough, and there was a taunting note in it, for her temper was fired by the carriage of the man.

"Not making," she protested, and ceased with a sneer.

Hercules seemed to draw himself a little more together and he spoke in a measured voice.

"Mistress Clarendra, I have the honour to demand your hand in marriage."

Clarendra went red with rage and amazement. Did this sea-creature really presume so far.

"And I have the honour to laugh in your face," she replied. Hercules contemplated her with a mild air of interest that exasperated her.

"You refuse?" he asked with the manner of one who is neither surprised nor disappointed, but still seeks for definite confirmation of what he hears.

"It seems like it," Clarendra replied with a shrug of her shoulders. She was angry with this talk and tired of it,

and almost unawares a little frightened, by its oddity and its calm.

"Why?" Hercules asked, as if he applied for knowledge that he was seriously desirous to gain.

"For one good reason out of a hundred," Clarendra answered, with a vindictive sharpness, "I am betrothed in marriage to my lord of Godalming."

Just for a moment Hercules' face showed surprise and something more than surprise. He puckered his lips and emitted a long whistle.

"My lord of Godalming, the Queen's minister?" he questioned, and Clarendra nodded in confirmation. "Why, he is some seventy years old."

"That," commented Clarendra tartly, "is God's business, my lord's business, and my business, but very surely it is none of your business."

Hercules shook his head and Clarendra through her growing vexation noted that there was a certain sternness in his look which she had never thought he could command.

"I think it is very much my business," he said, after ruminating for a while upon her words.

"How so?" she asked him angrily, though even her anger admitted that there was justice in his speech.

"Why did you not tell me this before?" he asked. The question was a reproach, but there was no reproach in his voice, only an alert curiosity.

"Upon my soul," cried Clarendra scornfully, "I am not bound to bawl into the ears of every man I meet that I am a betrothed maid."

"Very true," replied Hercules, "but you were bound as a bonded maid not to act as if you were a free woman with a free man. However, that is all one. Forget and forgive is a wholesome motto. Let us wed and say no more about it."

Clarendra could have hit him for the cheerfulness with which he seemed to take her agreement for granted.

"Have I not told you," she said sharply, "that I am to be married to my lord of Godalming?"

Hercules waved his hand with an air of protest at once derisive and commiserating.

"How can you say so, and I standing by? Do you think

I could permit such a monstrous alliance? Shall your youth, your beauty, your freshness, your grace, be wasted in the arms of an ancient? No, no, you must never marry my lord of Godalming."

Clarenda twitched her lips insolently.

"Pray how will you prevent it?" she asked.

"Why, very easily," Hercules answered. "Just by marrying you myself."

Clarenda smiled scornfully.

"So simple as that?"

Hercules nodded.

"Just so simple. Do you know that I own a castle yonder in the heart of the moor?"

"I know not, and I care not," Clarenda said testily, but Hercules went on as if not so much as a fly had buzzed.

"It is an ancient place but in good repair, and I think I can promise you will like it when you pay it a visit."

Clarenda's anger was waxing within her at the fellow's staggering fatuity.

"Only I shall not pay it a visit," she said, and yawned impudently without concealment.

"Yes, you will," responded Hercules firmly. "We will spend our honeymoon there."

The last crinkles of Clarenda's waning yawn rallied and reasserted themselves as an especially furious frown.

"You are ceasing to amuse me," she said, in a voice that she hoped would subjugate his rising insolence, but it had not that effect.

"I hope you are beginning to adore me," Hercules said, with the same polite gravity. Clarenda was well-nigh beside herself with anger.

"Go, fool, go," she screamed, and pointed with her finger the path he should take across the orchard grass.. Hercules stood as still as a tree and as steadfast.

"I fear you are obstinate," he said in a voice whose tinge of compassion maddened its hearer, "but indeed I am obstinate too, and obstinacy is a virtue in a good cause if a vice in a bad one. Will you come with me, lady?"

He made the proposition with such insistence that in spite of herself Clarenda felt compelled to give him an answer.

"No," she said roundly, but Hercules did not seem to take her denial seriously, for he asked again:

"Will you come?"

Clarenda, irritated out of all patience, clenched her fists, stamped upon the grass and well-nigh yelled at her questioner an emphatic, "No," that would have routed most suitors. But it had no disconcerting effect upon Hercules.

"You will come," he asserted with a quiet positiveness that fell across her anger like a splash of cold water. Then before she could guess at his intent he strode to her and caught her in his arms as he might have taken up a child to dandle it. So holding her he pressed his left hand across her mouth to prevent outcry, and bearing her as if she were but a featherweight he ran to the orchard gate and passed through it into the fringe of wood beyond.

For a moment she was too amazed at this attack to make any resistance, but as Hercules proceeded with quick strides to carry her thus helpless through the thicket she found her vigour if she could not find her voice and rained vain and ineffectual blows upon her captor's head and neck. But Hercules Flood, swinging along at the same measured stride, and supporting her as easily as if she were a baby, paid not the slightest heed to her cuffings, but continued his course to the spot where his great black horse was waiting. Still holding the struggling damsel pinioned in his clip he swung himself into the saddle and was off at a hand gallop before Clarenda realised that her mouth was now at liberty to utter as many screams as she pleased.

As the horse, with its double burden, took the moorland Griffith emerged from the cover of the wood, entered the orchard and picked up the three blades that Hercules had cast at the feet of Clarenda. Tucking them under his arm he quitted the orchard, locking the gate behind him, and mounting his own horse followed at a leisurely pace in the track of his friend.

CHAPTER XXV

MOUNT DRAGON

CLARENDA found it impossible later to establish any clear record in her mind of what happened thereafter. She knew indeed she was seated on a great horse in front of a man who girdled her at once firmly and gently with one arm while with the other he guided the headlong course of his steed across the empty moorland. She knew that she screamed for help and raved abuse and strove to strike at him and even to bite him in the blind wildness of her rage. She knew that the great horse seemed to gallop with incredible speed over the moor, sweeping up and down the billowing undulations as easily as if he had been cantering on the Queen's highway. She knew that her captor preserved an unbroken silence from the first to the last moment of that fantastic journey and never for an instant turned his steadfast face from the course he was making to glance at the woman who was writhing in his grasp. She felt in her raging helplessness as if she had been suddenly snatched from the tranquillity and happy laughter of her ordered life by some irresistible earth-spirit who was wafting her away upon a demon-steed to some ghastly cavern between the breasts of the haunted hills. And through all the course of that awesome ride they encountered no human being. It seemed to her as if he and she were alone in the world.

At length when her voice was hoarse with alternate imprecation and entreaty and when every pulse of her body seemed to be throbbing with definite fury and undefined fear, the mad career that threatened to her unhinged senses to be endless came to an end. She was suddenly aware that the hooves of the horse were no longer speeding over the turf of the downs and mounds, but were clattering noisily on the stony incline of a sloping causeway. She was conscious in the waning light of a massive build-

ing that showed black against the gold and azure of the summer sky; she was conscious of a bridge and an archway and of a vast courtyard open to the heavens. Then the horse, under the pressure of his rider's hand, came to a halt as if it had been magically metamorphosed into bronze. In another instant her ravisher, still clasping her in his arms, had flung himself lightly from the saddle. As soon as he had touched the earth he began to run, carrying her as lightly in spite of her shrieks and struggles as if she were a doll, through the gloom of a great doorway into a dimly-lighted hall, and then at full speed up an obscure and winding staircase that seemed to be set in the thickness of the wall. From this she suddenly emerged into a spacious chamber.

The next moment she found herself being swung lightly from her captor's clasp into the depth of a big and comfortable chair. She seemed to slip from the wheel of a whirlwind into the peace of a half-conscious repose. When she opened her eyes she found that she was alone.

She looked about her eagerly, trying to realise her whereabouts. The room was large and handsomely furnished. In front of her was a great fireplace on which a wood fire burned. Behind her a wide double window recessed in the thickness of the wall stood open to the air. To the right of the window was a large oil painting in a heavily carved and gilded frame which she saw, almost without realising what she saw, to be a life-size portrait of the Queen. At her left was the great door through which she had entered, and at her right a smaller door that was screened by a velvet curtain. Over the fireplace was fixed a pair of antlered skulls of deer and between them was a small trophy composed of the bows and quivers that emblazoned their doom. Against the wall was a massive table furnished with writing materials.

Clarenda's first action was to run to each of the doors in turn, only to find that both were locked. Then she hastened to the window and looked out with the faint hope of learning where she was. But she beheld nothing familiar to her, nothing but the green monotony of the moorland stretching away in arrested wave and trough of hill and valley,

The window was so deeply set in the thickness of the wall that she had heard no sound of drawing bolt or turning key, but she suddenly felt conscious that she was no longer alone in the room. As she swung round from the window she saw Hercules Flood standing before her in an attitude of courteous deference with a hospitable smile upon his face.

"You are welcome to my poor house," he said. "It and its master are heartily at your service."

She moved towards him with a reeling brain and furious eyes. She essayed to speak but no words came to her lips. Of all that she had screamed or shouted during that mad ride across the moorland she could remember nothing, and she seemed to have exhausted all her store of protest. Hercules saw the stress of her emotion, but he chose not to notice it.

"Suffer me," he said gently, "to offer you some refreshment after your journey. A little wine."

She found breath now and speech in a fresh gust of fury at his carriage, as debonair and amiable as if all the horror that had happened were the most everyday matter in the world.

"Have you gone mad all of a sudden," she burst out. "Do you think there is no justice in Devon, nor no queen in England, nor no God in heaven that you act thus?"

"My knowledge and my faith," he answered gravely, "assure me of justice and queen and God. With that knowledge and with that faith I have carried you to my castle."

"Take me hence at once," Clarendra commanded fiercely. "Set me free on the instant."

Hercules permitted himself the ripple of a smile as he listened to the imperious maid. As for her, while she spoke so bravely she could scarcely believe that it was indeed she who was speaking and in such terms, in such a place, to the man who stood before her. It all seemed part of the confused substance of a crazy dream. And yet it was no dream.

"Mistress Clarendra," said Hercules very soberly and suavely, "the key to this castle is ready to your hand; the pass-word for your freedom is for you to speak. Give

me your promise to marry me and you shall return to 'The Golden Hart' or to King's Welcome at once."

"I will give you no promise," she said wildly, "and I intend to return to King's Welcome at once."

"I think not," he said quietly, his manner as gentle as hers was fierce. "You came here, I fear me, somewhat against your will, and very certainly you cannot go away from here against my will."

"You dare not keep me here," she menaced, "you dare not, you dare not."

"May I presume to suggest," he said in a manner too polite to have any smack of banter, "that if I dared make so bold as to bring you here I may very well dare make so bold as to keep you here."

There was such a disagreeable leaven of reason in what the man said that Clarendra in spite of her bold show of courage felt very uncomfortable.

"Do you think that I shall not be missed?" she asked defiantly. Hercules shook his head.

"I am positive that you will be very greatly missed by all who have the felicity to be the familiars of your society," he assured her.

"You mock me," she said bitterly, "but indeed you shall be very sorry for your mocking."

"Indeed I do not mock you," he said earnestly. "Why should I mock a lady whom I love very honestly."

"Love!" She repeated his word and laughed at him. "Love and insult do not go together. Love and ruffian violence do not consort."

"Dear lady," said Hercules, "you speak wildly and at all adventure. Here is no insult, nor, save in the matter of our gallop, does anything akin to violence come into question, and that was managed as gently as might be."

"I wish you would have done with talking," Clarendra said, "and let me go hence quickly, for I am weary of you."

"You will go hence the moment you consent to marry me," Hercules said slowly, "but not a moment sooner. There is nothing of the ruffian in my conduct. You knew very well that I loved you. You led me to believe that my service was pleasing to you. Therefore there can be no offence in my offer of marriage. For my means they are

ample enough to gratify your desires; I hope I am neither ill-bred nor ill-mannered, and as for my gentility I am an Armada-man, which is the proudest title in England."

"You seem to forget that I have told you I am betrothed to my lord of Godalming," the girl said coldly. Hercules met her disdainful gaze unmoved.

"It seems to me that you were the first to forget it when you suffered me to woo you and never chose to tell me that you were not free to be wooed. Now your news comes too late and it has not sweetened in keeping. Old gentlemen of seventy should not hope to marry young maids of twenty while there are lusty bloods in the world to go a-wooing."

"My lord of Godalming," cried the raging girl, "will know how to avenge his offended honour."

"That is for hereafter," Hercules replied. "I think my lord might have been better employed than in running after maidens that might be his grand-chicks. But since you have brought my lord of Godalming into our talk, I will ask you a question. On your honour as a woman and as a clean maid are you in love with Lord Godalming?"

"Why do you ask?" Clarendra cried, with a sudden flushing face in spite of herself.

"Because I wish to know," answered Hercules. "Are you in love with Lord Godalming?"

"I like him very much," the girl faltered, most unconvincingly.

"That is not my answer," said Hercules, "though it is indeed an answer of a sort, but I seek for a fuller one. Do you love Lord Godalming as a true maid should love the man she is going to wed, with rapture and passion and longing?"

Clarendra grew very pale, and she steadied herself with a hand upon the back of the chair.

"You know that is not possible," she said in a low voice.

"I did not think it could be possible," said Hercules, "but nature has her caprices, and if you could have said so with a whole heart it might have gone hard with me to keep you here."

The girl looked at him eagerly, tingling with a new hope.

"How if I told you that there was another for whom I did so care?" she asked.

"That should not serve you," Hercules answered firmly. "This duty of yours to Lord Godalming which you would set as a shield between you and me, must stand as strong between you and another."

"I wish that other were here to save me," Clarendra cried fiercely.

Hercules shook his head.

"I doubt if he would prove of much service, whoever he may be. But if you please we will put him of one side in this business, which lies wholly between you and me. I want to marry you, and you made me believe I could marry you, and I mean to marry you."

"Do you mean to force me to marry you?" the girl asked, shrinking a little as she spoke and fixing wild eyes upon his quiet face.

"God forbid," he said, and crossed himself as he spoke, and he said it so earnestly that the girl was re-assured. "But I hope to win you by fair means——"

"Never!" Clarendra interrupted contemptuously. She felt now that she was safe in his hands, and free to flout him. But Hercules took no notice of the interruption.

"And I shall keep you here until I do. Believe me I have very good hopes. I am no worse a wooer than many another man. You have led me to believe that you liked me——"

"That was only make-believe," the girl flung in passionately. Hercules showed an indulgent smile which served to heighten her exasperation.

"That is as it may be," he replied good-humouredly, "and even if it were so I have known many a make-believe turn to a very pretty reality. Anyhow we can but try. In the meantime you are comfortably lodged. There are women here to wait upon you who will prove obedient to all your wishes"—he paused and added with a smile—"save your wish to escape. I have provided a housekeeper, a most worthy and reputable dame who shall wait upon you like your shadow, shall keep you as close company as ever Spanish duenna, so that your good fame shall run no risk of tarnish. For myself I shall only visit you in the day-time and

at the time and period of our familiar orchard hour when, if you so wish, the good woman shall keep us company."

"You are a mighty considerate gentleman," said Clarendra, mocking him. Yet she thought that, after all, she spoke some measure of truth.

"Indeed I hope so," Hercules replied, as simply as if Clarendra had patently meant what she said, "and I hope that you may find that your visit to my poor abode will prove pleasanter than you, at this present, expect. And in order that we may start in a spirit of good-fellowship I will make so bold as again to offer you refreshment."

He struck on a bell as he spoke, and a woman-servant promptly made her appearance. She was a healthy, pleasant-faced West Country lass, a sister of one of Hercules' seamen, and she had been too well schooled by Griffith to show the slightest surprise at the presence of a great lady in the lonely fastness. She paid a profound reverence to Clarendra of which the girl took no notice, and received the commands of Hercules to serve a collation at once. When she had left the room Clarendra turned hotly upon Hercules.

"You need order no repast for me," she cried, "for I will not eat or drink of your cheer."

"You will when you are hungry," Hercules replied confidently, "and in the meantime I have no wish to force your appetite. But while we await our victuals I think it were well that we should come to some terms together."

"I will make no terms with you," said Clarendra. "You are a villain."

"I am not a villain," Hercules asserted composedly, "as I hope you will find out in good time, and you must come to some terms with me, as you will find out immediately. If you are in a sense my prisoner I wish to make your captivity as easy and pleasing as possible, but its ease and pleasure depend in a great degree upon yourself."

"What ease or pleasure can there be?" Clarendra asked bitterly, "in this hateful place and in such hateful company?"

"That depends very much upon you," Hercules answered. "Now, for example, I take it that however much you are momentarily incensed against me"—Clarendra could have yelled with rage at his impudent use of the word "momen-

tarily"—"you are far too sensible a woman to make any attempt upon your life. If I thought you were not so sensible I should have to see to it that you were never left alone, that you were fed by your women, that no sharp instrument was allowed to be near you, and—most important point of all—that this window should be bricked up."

He pointed as he spoke to the fair open window in the recess which admitted the light and air in bountiful measure and commanded a noble view of the spreading moor. Clarendra sneered at him.

"I am not going to take my life," she replied, "because I have had the misfortune to fall into the hands of a ruffian whom I hope to live to see hanged."

Hercules took her vituperation in excellent part and showed only pleasure at her assurance.

"I accept your promise," he said. "Let me assure you that unless you were a bird or were as celestially an angel as you are an angel terrestrially and so were possessed of wings, you could never escape from my eyrie."

Clarendra said nothing in reply but she gave him a very venomous glance. Hercules continued.

"Let me also assure you that you shall ever receive the most respectful treatment while you honour my house with your presence. Within the confines of your apartments you shall be free to do as you please. The only condition I presume to make is that I shall be permitted the same privilege as I enjoyed when you tenanted 'The Golden Hart,' that of being granted the daily audience of an hour in which to plead my suit."

"If every day had a hundred hours," said Clarendra savagely, "and every minute of those hours were each of an hour's length, and all of them were yours to woo me, you might speak from here till Doomsday and be no better than you are to-day."

Hercules permitted himself a smile of amiable disagreement.

"If a man has anything to say that is worth saying," he urged, "it generally wins home in the end."

At this point in the strange dialogue two women servants—the same that had come before and another much like her—entered, bearing between them a large tray furnished

with viands and wines. They set the tray down on a sideboard while they placed a small table near to where Clarendia stood, and after covering it with a fair cloth, arrayed the meat and liquor upon it. Hercules indicated the ordered table with his hand.

"Pray do me the honour to sit and eat," he requested. "You must surely be in need of food."

"I am not hungry," Clarendia answered coldly. This was not true for she was very hungry indeed. It was an age-long time past her dinner hour, at which time she, being a healthy young woman, was accustomed to make a hearty meal. She was tired, too, and needed the stimulant of food and drink. But she was firm not to demean herself to accept her captor's hospitality.

When Hercules found that he could not persuade her to taste the meat, he filled a silver cup with wine at the sideboard and proffered it to Clarendia, but she thrust it from her so sharply that some of the wine was spilled from the cup and ran over the fingers of Hercules and made a little red pool on the floor.

"I wish it were your heart's blood," she said sombrely. Hercules only smiled at her vehemence.

"My heart's blood is ever at your service," he protested.

Clarendia turned swiftly upon him.

"If you speak truth," she cried, "and not ungallant mockery, shed me your heart's blood now, that it may mingle with the spilt wine on the floor."

"That would be but to do you a great disservice," Hercules replied calmly. "You will come to find that you can put my blood to a better service than to mess the boards."

"If you will render me this service I shall ask for no other," said Clarendia.

"Likely not," answered Hercules, "for it is vain to ask favours of a dead man. But while I live I am ever your servant, and I drink now to your health, and your better understanding, and to our happiness together hereafter."

Clarendia gave him a stabbing glance, but it slid off the imperturbability of her host who drained his cup and set it down upon the table. Once again he pressed her to eat

and on her refusal the women advanced to clear the board, but Hercules stayed them with a gesture.

"Leave the good victuals," he commanded. "The lady may like a bite or sup later on."

Clarenda was so infuriated by the patronage of this forethought that she forgot all her pretty manners in her anger. She gripped a hold on a corner of the table-cloth, gave a tug at it and launched all the contents of the table in confusion on the floor. Manchets of bread skipped hither and thither. The silver goblet from which Hercules had drunk rolled with a drumming sound across the boards. The meats, which happily were cold and included a chicken and a chine of beef, lay where they fell and preserved some air of dignity in their overthrow.

Clarenda gave a little groan of horror when she saw what she had done, but Hercules took no more notice of the episode than if it had been the customary manner for a lady to conclude a repast. He dismissed the servants with a gesture and addressed Clarenda again.

"It is now fitting that I should take my leave. I have enjoyed to-day more than my allotted share of your company, but the circumstances were unusual and must excuse me. To-morrow I will permit myself to wait upon you at the familiar time and I promise you that I will not exceed my licence without your permission."

"I cannot," said Clarenda, "while I am your prisoner, prevent you from importuning me with your presence and your insolence. But you shall find that you are speaking to a stone."

"A friend of mine," replied Hercules, "told me that there was once a poet in old Greece—I forget his name—who was so cunning with his songs that he could even persuade stones to move from their settled places. I hope that the sincerity of my speech may have no less fortunate an effect than the pipings of the antique singer."

Clarenda's only reply was to turn away from the speaker with an air of unconquerable aversion.

"In the meantime," Hercules went on, "yonder is your sleeping apartment, and within attends a very worthy woman whom I have appointed to wait upon you. You will find her amiable, obsequious, and in all things, save one thing,

obedient. She will remain in her ante-room of nights and it will be her final duty, when you choose to retire, to bolt yonder door securely so that no one can intrude upon your privacy. I may say, however, that the door will also be locked from the outside so that if by any chance you did succeed in cheating your guardian and drawing the bolts, you would be no nearer to the freedom you covet, but which, I believe, you would regret if you obtained it, than you are at this moment."

While she glared at him, unable to think of any further flout or jeer that seemed worthy of her sense of wrong, Hercules made her an obeisance and, turning, quitted the room.

CHAPTER XXVI

DEBORAH PENFEATHER

LONG after the departure of Hercules, Clarendia sat in the chair into which she had dropped mechanically, thoughtless in the very thronging of her thoughts. At last, however, she roused herself from her lethargy and resolved to find a measure of ease for her cares in action of some kind. Confirmation of her intent came to her as she rose and faced the great painting of the Queen which seemed to stare at her with the same strange, menacing smile that her Majesty so often displayed to her sisterkins. Clarendia almost unconsciously approached the portrait and surveyed it. It represented the great Queen in a kind of fancy dress, very gorgeous and barbaric in colouring, and as it showed her in the happy serenity of extreme youth it was clearly an ideal if not imaginary image, conceived from his fancy by the painter who had signed his name in a corner, "Philemon Minster." Still, it gave the great Queen's features, and it gave the great Queen's gaze, and it had enough of the great Queen about it to make Clarendia wonder what the great Queen would think if she knew of the present state of her maid of honour. Also it had enough of the great Queen about it to make Clarendia resolute to act as that Queen might act in her condition.

If she was a captive, at least her prison, judging by the great room in which she stood, was both roomy and comfortable. She now determined to explore the remainder of her domain, and with this intention she went to the curtained door and, finding it now unlocked, passed through. She halted in a small room, neatly and plainly furnished with a truckle-bed, a table and a chair, which served as an ante-room to a larger room beyond that was curtained off from it. Crossing the room and drawing this curtain

Clarenda entered a handsome bedchamber that was furnished as richly and as agreeably as the most fastidious inmate could desire. Pile of Genova carpeted the floor; exquisitely worked Arras mantled the walls. A magnificently carved bed with elaborately wrought pillars held a place of state and thickly cushioned chairs of eastern design tempted to indolence and suggested repose. There were basins and ewers of solid silver that were worthy of a Queen's use, and an abundance of napery that seemed finer and whiter than anything that Clarenda had seen at Court. A quantity of curious cut and coloured flagons, precious in themselves, seemed to be charged with essences yet more precious. Stately chests of carved oak proved later to be richly stored with all the necessities of woman's gear.

In the room a stout middle-aged woman sat before a small fire on a large hearth and knitted assiduously as if the world would never grow young.

"Who are you?" Clarenda catechised, with a challenge in her voice that she deemed due to herself.

The woman rose and dipped Clarenda a ponderous curtsy. She was a broad-built, large-faced woman, and she surveyed Clarenda with a patient scrutiny which, if it commented, kept the secret of its comment.

"Deborah Penfeather, madam," she answered, and again lowered and elevated her bulk as she spoke. Clarenda was somewhat taken aback by the woman's workaday tranquillity under such uneasy conditions.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, as a sequel to her former question. Gammer Penfeather dipped again.

"Master Flood has set me here as his housekeeper, having confidence in me because he knew me for many a yesterday, knows me to-day and will know me, I hope, for many a come to-morrow."

"Are you privy to this wicked plot?" cried Clarenda hotly.

Gammer Penfeather waggled her placid face.

"I know nothing of plots," she answered, "and though I have seen a deal of wickedness in my time, I thank Heaven I have had nothing to do with it. I am the wife of one of Master Flood's seamen, and the mother of another. May be you know them, young lady?"

"No, I do not," Clarendra protested, interrupting, but Deborah Penfeather overflowed her interruption.

"Folk call them big Jasper Penfeather and little Jasper Penfeather, by way of nick-name like, for my husband is a good six foot and a bittock in height, he is, while my son—and this is the only matter in which he has ever disappointed his family—is no more than a paltry five feet eleven inches or so. Think of that now. What a difference you see between great A. and little B., as the saying is."

Having recounted this family history to the very unwilling ears of Clarendra, Mistress Deborah Penfeather lifted her knitting-busy fingers from the pit of her stomach to which she had lowered them on Clarendra's entrance, and mooned to the girl with extreme good-humour. But Clarendra was in no mood to be tolerant of affable banalities.

"Deborah Penfeather," said Clarendra hastily, "do you know that I am held here a prisoner against my will?"

Deborah Penfeather moved her large head slowly from side to side in an action that resembled the oscillation of a pendulum.

"I know what I know," she answered, "and I know not what I do not know. Truly I know that you are betrothed to Master Flood."

"I am nothing of the sort," Clarendra ejaculated hurriedly, but Deborah Penfeather, never heeding her, went on slowly.

"And you are shortly to be espoused, and I will say this for you both that you will make a bonny pair. Never saw I a finer man than Master Flood though I married Jasper Penfeather that was a fine fellow of his hands and and bore another Jasper that was more than all his weight if less than all his inches. As for yourself I may tell you without flattery that you will make a fair bride."

"I hope I will make a bride one of these days," said Clarendra quickly, "but I tell you here and now that I am not going to be the bride of your ruffianly master."

Deborah Penfeather looked at Clarendra with an air of assured tolerance which Clarendra found exceedingly exasperating.

"I have it in my mind," said Deborah Penfeather, with a careful slowness, "that Master Hercules told me that he was bringing home his bride to Mountdragon."

"He may have told you that——" Clarendia sought to interrupt, but Deborah Penfeather flowed on unheeding.

"And I have always found that when Master Hercules said a thing he also meant it, and that whenever Master Hercules said a thing was going to come about that thing was sure to come about. So you may take it from me, young lady, that if Master Hercules says you are to be his bride, his bride you will be, will you or nill you, and it were wise for you to make up your mind betimes to the necessity."

"My good woman," Clarendia said, controlling her wrath as well as she could, "I tell you once for all that I am not going to be the bride of your master."

"The hen is not heard to cackle when Chanticleer is heard to crow, as the saying is," Deborah commented calmly. "I have known Master Flood this many a good year and I know that the wind blows to his whistle, as the saying is."

The dogmatism and stolidity of the good woman exasperated Clarendia, but she knew that with such a personage patience was the better part and she still managed to swallow her anger.

"Listen to me," said Clarendia, speaking her words with all the weight she could command, "and consider well what I say to you. I have many and powerful friends who will interest themselves in my case. The chief of them you should surely know by name. I mean my lord Godalming."

Deborah Penfeather nodded her head in dutiful acknowledgment of the illustrious name.

"Oh, aye," she said slowly, "I have heard of him, time and again. He is a great lord, I know, and he is an old lord, I am told. They say that there is no fool like an old fool, but it is not for me to make so bold as to assert that the cap fits my lord's head."

Clarendia found it convenient to ignore this suggestion and continued her argument.

"When my lord Godalming knows of my abduction he

will be swift to set me free, and, very likely, to hang Master Flood for his rascality."

"I am thinking," said Deborah, "that it will not be so easy for his lordship to learn of your hiding-place, and as to the hanging of Master Flood, why there may be some folk in the West Country that would have a word to say in the matter."

Clarenda's heart sank within her as she listened to the woman. It might indeed very well be true that her prison would prove hard to break. She nerved herself for another effort against the impassibility of Deborah Penfeather.

"I can promise you," she tempted, "more money than you have ever seen in your life, as much money as will keep you and yours in ease for the rest of your lives, if you will either aid me to escape from this place, or at least help me to convey a message to my friends."

Deborah did not seem either allured or offended by Clarenda's proposal, which she received with her habitual philosophic calm.

"If you were to pile me a pile of gold as high as this castle," she answered, "I would not say a word or do a thing against the will of Master Flood. So you may keep your breath to cool your porridge, as the saying is."

"You are sharing in a crime," Clarenda warned her, "you are abetting this man in his villainy. When he comes to be punished you may have to share his punishment."

"I know nothing of all that," answered Deborah. "All I know is that Master Flood has set me here to tend your ladyship and to do your will in all things serviceable, save and except those things that you would have me do. The trusty dog has but one master, as the saying is."

Clarenda knew enough of human nature to recognise that the fidelity of the woman was impregnable, and she decided to waste no more time in a futile enterprise. She turned baffled and furious to quit the room. Deborah spoke again.

"If you have any need of me you have but to call and I will wait upon you. And whenever you are weary I will help you to your bed." Then, as Clarenda vanished, she seated herself and composedly resumed her knitting.

When she found herself back in the great room again, and staring in the bright summer twilight at the glittering, unwinking picture of the great Queen, Clarendra felt chill as if she were some child in a tale penned in an ogre's castle. An inward gnawing of appetite seemed to warn her that it was her duty to fortify herself against her unhappy condition if only that she might be ready when redemption came to greet redemption heartily. Also she must keep alert in health and strength that when the time came she might have the necessary energy to exult over her abductor. Perhaps indeed all these specious arguments were in reality no more than so many concessions to hunger. At least the consequence of them was that Clarendra now with an almost animal swiftness and vehemence pounced upon the viands that through her own wilfulness littered the floor, and seizing a manchet of bread and tearing a limb from a chicken she squatted in a huddle on the floor and began quite ravenously and in quite a savage fashion to make a meal.

CHAPTER XXVII

A PARLEY

AT the hour of eleven next morning Hercules presented himself at the door of the great chamber and requested permission to enter. The door was unbolted by Gammer Penfeather, who dropped her master a respectful curtsy. Hercules glanced around him. Clarenda was not in the room, which had been carefully tidied by the serving-woman and showed no traces of the turmoil of the previous evening.

"How does Mistress Constant find herself this morning?" was Hercules' first enquiry.

"The young lady slept well," Deborah replied, "and the young lady slept long, which is not to be wondered at, for she came to bed late, and she must have passed a wearing day."

She said this with no hint of reproach or reproof in her voice but merely as a comment upon an obvious fact. To Deborah Penfeather as to Deborah Penfeather's husband, and to all Jasper Penfeather's co-mates, whatever Master Flood was pleased to do was necessarily right and whatever Master Flood might be pleased to command must be unquestioningly obeyed.

"Is Mistress Constant awake now?" Hercules asked. The woman nodded. "Will you then," he continued, "ask Mistress Constant if she will be so good as to let me know at what hour it may suit her to permit me to wait upon her."

Whatever Gammer Penfeather may have thought of the formality and politeness of Hercules' request and whatever surprise she may have felt at his condescending to entreat where it was in his power to command, she allowed no sign of any emotion to trouble the composure of her countenance. With another curtsy she disap-

peared into the adjoining bedroom. Hercules slowly paced up and down the great hall wondering a little, but not over-much, as to the mood in which Clarendra would be if she consented to receive him. It was never his way to waste time in speculation as to events that must necessarily unfold themselves speedily. Nor did he dissipate the vigour of his mind in consideration of the possible consequences of his conduct. He had done a bold and a daring thing in carrying this girl off, but he had done it deliberately, because it had seemed to him the best thing to do.

In less than a minute Deborah returned with the intelligence that Mistress Clarendra would be with Hercules in a very little while as she had nearly completed her dressing. Hercules enquired anxiously if she had broken her fast and was reassured to learn that the young lady had done so, satisfactorily, substantially and with apparent relish. Hercules looked approval and in his mind commended Clarendra for proving herself to be the sensible young woman he had always believed her to be essentially.

In another minute Clarendra entered the room. She was looking exceedingly handsome, he thought, as he advanced to greet her. Rest and food had removed all traces from her face of the passion that had ravaged it yesternight. With the aid of Goody Deborah Penfeather she had repaired such injury and removed such stain as forced and violent travel had inflicted upon her person and she looked as comely and as composed as if she were queening it in the orchard of "The Golden Hart" instead of finding herself a prisoner in a castle nameless and unknown to her.

Hercules dismissed Gammer Penfeather with a gesture into the adjoining room and placed a chair for Clarendra, who accepted it with a grave salutation and seated herself with an air of quiet dignity which pleased him.

"I hope," said Hercules as graciously as if he were an ordinary host addressing an ordinary guest, "that you find yourself refreshed after your night's rest?"

"I have slept well," replied Clarendra deliberately, "and I have eaten well, whereby I have indeed gained refreshment, and with the consent of Heaven, I hope to eat well and to sleep well so long as I am held here, that I may

be in the better case to enjoy my freedom when it comes."

"Your freedom may come this afternoon or to-morrow morning, or whenever you please," said Hercules earnestly. "It is but your promise to marry me, and all the gates of this place fly open."

"If you wait on my promise to marry you," said Clarendia slowly, "you will be an old man and a grey man, and then you will find that you are but at the beginning of waiting. If you had wit enough to guess the length and breadth of my hatred of you, you would see on what a fool's errand you run, but you have not so much wit in all your bulk, and therefore I am prepared to wait upon God's Providence."

"I wonder," said Hercules thoughtfully, "why you profess to hate me so?"

"Do you indeed?" retorted Clarendia, her voice a very clarion of scorn. "You handle a well-born, honourable maid as roughly as if she were a wanton. Indeed I should have thought better of you once than to believe that you would handle a wanton so. You kidnap me, maltreat me, insult me, imprison me, and then you are all of a wonder because I am not kissing your feet."

"You misjudge me, lady," Hercules answered steadily. "As to the question of ill-treatment, I would leave it to your finer judgment to decide which of us has the worse treated the other."

"Why, you, of course," shrilled the maid, but Hercules waved a protesting hand.

"By your leave," he said, "I would ask you to consider. You were pleased, in your capriciousness, to set your heart upon my house."

"And you were pleased," Clarendia riposted, "in your capriciousness to pretend to pleasure me, when all the while you were making me bend to your pitiful conditions."

"I found you very fair," Hercules said simply, "and I longed for your company."

"I did not long for yours, I promise you," Clarendia cried, a little shaken in her equanimity by her rising anger. "I hated you for your mulish whim, for your brutal obstinacy. I wanted to punish you for your stubbornness. But I thought I was punishing the stubbornness of a gen-

tleman. I did not dream that I was placing myself at the mercy of a savage."

For a moment a flush of blood deepened the weather-burn of Hercules' cheeks. But his voice was as steady as before when he made answer.

"I take note," he said, "that your friends and you make a great deal of play with that same word 'gentleman.' Under cover of that word certain friends of yours permitted themselves, and were permitted by you"—Clarenda strove to interrupt with a vehement "No, no," but Hercules continued, without heeding her attempt—"to be grossly offensive towards a simple stranger whose only fault was his readiness to comply with your vagaries."

"I could explain——" Clarenda began, at once honest and angry. But Hercules shook his head.

"The event," he said, "was its own explanation. The gentlemen were there with your permission and they were pleased to make merry at my expense, and later I was pleased to make merry at their expense and so we could afford to cry quits. But between you and me the matter is different. You must not believe that I would make you my prisoner thus for the sake of a silly jest. If that were all there was to it, I should have said you good-bye with a light heart."

"What more was there to it?" Clarenda asked in a low voice, as if she were unwilling to think the question that she felt compelled to ask.

"There was this much more to it," continued Hercules, "that you knew very well that I loved you and that, knowing as you did of my love, you deliberately encouraged it——"

"No, no," came again from Clarenda, on a note a little fainter than before.

"And not only did you encourage me in my wooing, but you gave me to believe that the love I proffered you were not unwilling to return."

"No, no," protested Clarenda again, but this time her protesting voice was almost inaudible.

"Yes, yes," replied Hercules positively. "The thing is so and you cannot escape from it. Come, you and your friends have stabbed at me with that word 'gentleman'

often enough. It would seem that because you chose to take me for a clown you were free to make what use of my heart you pleased——”

“Your heart!” interrupted Clarendra contemptuously, with a bitter twist of her lips.

“Yes, my heart,” persisted Hercules, “my honest heart, my man’s heart that I was ready to lay at your feet, but not for you to trample on or play foot football with. You see I took you, in spite of your faults——”

“My faults,” squalled Clarendra, roused from her enforced restraint and glaring at him with flaming cheeks and blazing eyes, “my faults!”

“Even so,” said Hercules coolly, “your faults. Dear maid, you do not surely esteem yourself faultless. I could make you a catalogue that might amaze you. I never esteemed you faultless. I never took you for an angel—such prodigies do not walk our common earth—but, at least, I took you for a gentlewoman.”

“How dare you speak to me after this fashion?” cried Clarendra, half rising from her chair in her rage. Then she remembered her helplessness and sank back again.

“I thought you were a gentlewoman,” Hercules went on as steadily as if she had not sought to interrupt, “and I still think you are a gentlewoman. That indeed is why you are here. If you were merely the heartless, thoughtless, soulless baggage that others in my case might believe you to be, I promise you that I should not have wasted another thought or act upon you.”

Clarendra was so staggered by the man’s assurance that she gaped at him in amazement. Here was indeed a mad manner of justification. But she did not speak or strive to speak and Hercules went doggedly on.

“It is because I still esteem you a gentlewoman, because I still hold you honest in heart and clean in mind that I have been at the pains to carry you hither. You must not allow yourself to believe that I never beheld a fair woman before I saw your face, or that I would childishly assert that there is no other fair woman in the world. But I do believe that there is no other woman in the world for me, just as I honestly believe that there is not and cannot be any other man in the world for you.”

By this time Clenda was so angry at his arrogance that she would have liked to bite and scratch him, yet she listened to his insolence with a fascination that was akin to stupefaction.

"I refuse," pursued Hercules, "to credit that a woman like you could, for the gratification of a petty spite, stoop so meanly as to deceive and trick and cheat a man like me."

He said this so simply that Clenda, even in the white heat of her fury, could not, as she looked at him and saw how proper a man he was, brand him with vanity. He was, as she had to admit to herself reluctantly, only giving himself his due and even less than his due. But she made no such admission public either by word or look, but sat watching him steadfastly, silently.

"All love-making is a kind of duello," Hercules went on, "but all duellos are governed by honourable laws for honourable combatants and the duello of man and woman is no exception to this commendable ordinance. You will not assert that you played the wanton's part with me, alluring merely to flout, inviting only to betray. When you saw that I loved you as a true man should love a fair maid, you gave no sign that my love was not welcome to you. Wherefore I was free to assume that my love was welcome to you."

"I know not what you assumed," said Clenda furiously, "and I care not what you assumed. But it seems to me, and surely it must seem to you who call yourself a man of sense, that you are making a great deal out of a very little matter."

"How, pray, do you discover that?" asked Hercules blandly. "May it please you elucidate, for I hope I have an open mind to argument."

"Let us suppose," said Clenda rapidly, "that I had the skittishness—to call it by a mild name—or the viciousness—to call it by a strong name—which urged me to play the part of temptress to one that seemed to pride himself on his invulnerability to temptation, this were surely a trifle to move a strong man to vengeance?"

"That were indeed a trifle," Hercules conceded tranquilly, "if that were all. But you seem to forget, in the

first place, that you set a trap for me, to make me the staring-stock of your friends."

"Ah, this is pride," cried Clarendra, "wounded pride, not wounded love."

"And in the second place," Hercules continued, "you seem to forget that while you encouraged my honest suit, you were all the time the pledged bride of another man and kept your betrothal secret from me."

Clarendra said nothing, for indeed she had nothing to say.

"Now I do not believe," Hercules asserted, "and I am sure that you would not have me believe, that you were ready so to wrong an honourable man like my lord of Godalming as to let another man make love to you, unless your own heart very strongly urged and prompted you to such a course. Am I not right in this surmise?"

Clarendra stared at him with raging eyes. It maddened her to be so set in the wrong by her enemy.

"I shall not answer you," she cried, "you have no right to question my actions. But if you believe evil of me why do you seek to marry me?"

"By your leave," said Hercules, "I have just told you that I do not believe evil of you. I want to marry you because I believe you are at heart a good and honest maid, and because I believe that I am the right man to marry you, and to help your goodness and your honesty to get the better of your failings. If you were to marry my lord of Godalming—which would be, in itself, a sin against nature—you would get no aid to your betterment from an old and doting man. Nor would you get such aid from some courtier, that is more of a mask than a man. Take my word for it, I am the right man for you."

"You the right man for me," she repeated scornfully, "you, the bully, the coward——"

"Come, come," interrupted Hercules, quite good-humouredly, "let us ride softly over rough ground. I hold myself to be no more of a bully than occasion deserves, and for my courage, such as it is, I am content to refer you to the merry gentlemen your friends."

"A man may very well be brave with men and yet be brutal to a woman," Clarendra snapped.

"Brutality is not necessarily cowardice," Hercules observed benignly, "but I do not plead guilty to brutality."

"Yet it may come to pass that you hang for it, none the less," said Clarendra savagely. Hercules laughed pleasantly.

"You are no cheerful prophetess," he said, "to wish a halter for your husband."

"You are not my husband," she screamed. "You never will be my husband."

"I think otherwise," he retorted calmly. "I feel confident that Providence has set us two together to be friends and lovers and mates. I know you are the woman for me and I know that I am the man for you."

"You are a fool, as well as all the rest," said Clarendra tersely. Hercules shook his head.

"Not such a fool as you think. I know you not a little and I know myself not a little, and I think that the pair of us should make a gallant match. I am no more your elder than a man should be; I have sufficient health and sufficient strength and sufficient wealth. And above all the rest, I love you dearly."

Clarendra looked furiously at him as he paused, and yet there was a kind of twitching at her heart which troubled her, because of the ringing sincerity of the man's speech.

"Yes," said Hercules simply, "I love you dearly. That you are beautiful any piece of silvered glass will assure you better than my tongue, but I have seen a many fair women in all the quarters of the globe, and never a one to compare with you. You would make the man you loved a gallant comrade and I dare to swear that I would make the woman I loved a loyal lover. Life is in God's hands to control its course, but if you will consent to take me, lady, I think that, God willing, we shall live in very sweet amity together."

Clarendra was very angry with Hercules for delivering this speech, but also she was very angry with herself when she found that, much against her will, she had been constrained to listen to it with a certain degree of pleasure. It was spoken with such a manly sincerity, it pleaded the cause of his love with such earnestness and straightforward loyalty that, had the conditions been different, Clarendra

was fain to admit that she would have been willing to hear more on such a theme from such a pleader.

But the conditions were not different and they seemed suddenly to become yet more bitter because of this hint of yielding to his suit, or at least of finding a measure of satisfaction in listening to his suit. So she lashed herself afresh into anger.

"You might win some maids with your cozening speech," she cried, "but you shall not so win me. If there were a Holy Book in this room—though indeed it were strange to find a Holy Book in such a shameful place—I would swear my oath upon it that come what may come, I would never marry you, never forgive you, never know rest or content again until I were quittingly revenged upon you."

Hercules looked at the raging girl in a rapture of admiration. She showed so splendidly handsome in her anger that he found himself unable to regret the fierceness of her temper when he saw that it served her beauty so well.

"I hope you will change your mind," he said. "I think that you will change your mind, but I protest that I like your warmth. A man like me would not wish for a wife without a proper spirit. As I happen to be a fellow of a somewhat even temper you will bring to our alliance a pinch or so of wholesome necessary vehemence which will be good for both of us."

Clarenda felt that she had said all she could say and that there were no words left to her in which to emphasise further her abhorrence of her host, who was now galling her afresh by treating her fierce repudiation so lightly and by persisting in speaking as if she and he were plighted folk. But while she was casting about for terms of scorn and finding none to her mind, Hercules, realising that his usual time had expired, saluted her and left her to herself.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALARMS AND EXCURSIONS

ALTHOUGH "The Golden Hart" had lost its Mistress-master, its crew—to continue the metaphor—were in happy ignorance of the loss. The fact that Clarenda did not make an appearance for the mid-day dinner gave her servants no surprise. They knew her to be erratic, heedless of punctualities and formalities, and they fed themselves, untroubled by her absence. When, however, more than an hour had passed since the ship's bell had been sounded to announce the meal, Clarenda's eminently respectable housekeeper, Mistress Gannett, that had been a mayor's lady, began to feel a little restless at the delay and to ask herself if her somewhat troublesome charge could have fallen asleep in her orchard retreat, or even have fainted from the heat, seeing that the day was very warm. So she swayed slowly and solemnly, being a portly personage, out of "The Golden Hart" and through a succession of parti-coloured gardens till she arrived, panting a little, in spite of the leisure of her progress, at the orchard close only to find it tenantless. The silken cushions piled the rustic seat, but no fair figure crushed their softness. The folio of classic fables lay in its place, waiting for the bright face to bend over it, all eagerness and smiles. The abandoned lute lay upon the grass, longing surely for those dear hands to fondle it into surrender of ravishing harmonies.

Good Mistress Gannett did not think such thoughts. She did not trouble her mind further than to assure herself that her mistress was not in her familiar place, nor indeed in any other part of the orchard. Perplexed, but not extravagantly so, she retraced her steps with the same decorous sloth, chewing as she went a few sensible reflections on the vagaries of young ladies. As she trod the turf in

front of the land-ship one of the male servants, who was evidently awaiting her return, hurried forward to meet her and informed her that there was a youth at hand who desired to speak with her. As the servant spoke he beckoned and Mistress Gannett, following the direction of his gesture, beheld a sheepish, open-faced, sunburnt youth in a seafaring habit, who on the servant's invitation now came lurching towards her, and after making an awkward salutation, asked if she were Mistress Gannett. Mistress Gannett nodded.

"A lady spoke to me in the town awhile ago," the lad said, "and gave me a silver piece"—he opened a brown hand as he spoke and showed the coin reposing there in witness to his tale—"and told me to go to Flood's Folly and tell Mistress Gannett that she had gone over to King's Welcome for a few days, and that Mistress Gannett was to keep everything in work-a-day order until her return."

Mistress Gannett was not exactly taken aback by this unexpected message, but she was certainly a little annoyed at this flagrant proof of Clarendon's flightiness. "Really," she reflected, "one who had been in her time a mayoress of Plymouth was entitled to a little more consideration from a girl who might almost have been her grandchild, fine Court lady though she was." But she manifested no more of this feeling than an impatient "Tut, tut!" which she followed up by asking the lad if he would like a glass of ale for his pains. As the lad responded very heartily that there was nothing he would like better he was favoured with this refreshment. Between his draughts he explained to his hostess that he was cabin-boy on a ship that had just come into port, that he was a stranger to Plymouth, and that in all his travels he had never seen anything so strange as "The Golden Hart." Therewith he finished his liquor and after again saluting Mistress Gannett went his way back to the town and his ship in great seeming of contentment.

He did not leave Mistress Gannett in great contentment, however. It is true that any slight anxiety she might have felt about her eccentric young mistress was banished from her mind, but her own sense of dignity and importance was sadly ruffled. She fumed in private for a while and it

took a good hour or so to restore her to habitual self-complacency.

When she was herself again Mistress Gannett at first found a certain pleasure in her position. Isolated by the absence of Clarendia she became for the time being the mistress of the land-ship, and she enjoyed for a while a sense of lonely pomp, though she could have wished to enjoy it in a less outlandish habitation. She would have rejoiced to be in command at King's Welcome, for instance, but "The Golden Hart" seemed, to orderly and work-a-day commonsense, too foolish a place to be endured without an extravagant expenditure of patience and good humour. Still she had to admit that she was in very comfortable quarters and she exercised her, for the time, undivided authority with the manner of one who never forgot that golden mayoralty of the past.

So the first day passed in tranquillity, for there was less noise in "The Golden Hart" now that Clarendia was no longer present, running here, there and everywhere, always singing or playing or laughing in the exuberance of her young moods. A second day flushed and faded like the first and a spirit of drowsiness seemed to have settled upon the land-ship. But when a third day had passed in its turn, Mistress Gannett began to feel that the, at first, so welcome repose began to grow a trifle oppressive and that she herself was finding her situation a little dull.

Thus deeming her immediate existence tedious Mistress Gannett began to get restless. She missed the buoyancy, the exhilaration, the clash of whims and fancies that Clarendia carried with her, and which, while she was in the vortex of their play, Mistress Gannett had often enough dratted beneath her breath. So she began to fidget, to move uneasily about the queer house, and to spend time foolishly enough in vain computations as to the possible date of the errant young lady's return. In a little while she began to feel that it was really imperative that she should have some precise information on this point, and that she could not do better than to set out to garner the desired knowledge for herself. After all, it was no great ways to King's Welcome. You had but to walk a mile or so of high road to reach the humming town which to the

heart of Mistress Gannett was easily the best among the habitations of men. Then you crossed the town and mounting a little you found yourself at the lodge-gates of King's Welcome.

It took Mistress Gannett some time to come to a decision on a matter so momentous, but having once come to it she was earnest to put it into execution. So she donned stout shoes, hooded herself, handled her staff and telling her subordinates no more than that she was taking the air for a spell, set off on her pilgrimage.

It was a pleasant day and Mistress Gannett was by habit a placid woman who took all things leisurely, including country walks. So she waded slowly through the circumambient air, sniffing the kindly savour of grass and flower with the familiar animal satisfaction of one that is country born and bred. It was with a much more conscious satisfaction that she quitted the open country and found herself treading the cobble-stones of the narrow streets of Plymouth and nosing the sharp savour of the sea. Plymouth was her idol; in Plymouth she had tasted what she believed to be greatness; in Plymouth she was still accounted one of its most estimable and reputable citizenesses.

She had left Plymouth reluctantly to share with a humorous young lady the humours of "The Golden Hart." Now as she walked its ways again she found herself wishing very heartily that she were returning to her own modest lodgement. But as this was not to be thought of for the moment, she continued her journey, exchanging nods and greetings with familiar faces and pausing, every once in a way, to taste a bit of local gossip. So tranquilly she traversed the town and had scarcely left the last fringe of its dwelling-places behind her before she found herself face to face with the gaunt grey walls and grim iron gates of King's Welcome.

Here tranquillity, that had armed her thus far at a gentle amble, promptly abandoned her, not to return for many an anxious hour.

A man and a boy were coming forth from the gates, and Mistress Gannett knew the pair well enough. The man was Master Sandys, and the lad was the lodge-keeper's son. Master Sandys, having plenty of time on his hands since

Clarenda quitted King's Welcome, allowed himself the liberty of a great deal of rambling abroad, to find in the study of the flora and fauna of Devon a relaxation from certain optical experiments which occupied the major part of his day. He was frequently accompanied on his wanderings by the lodge-keeper's son, Jenkin, a lad of a lively intelligence that knew the countryside by heart. Master Sandys now paused and saluted.

"Good day to you, Mistress Gannett," he said affably, for he shared in the general respect that Plymouth accorded to the good woman. He motioned to the lad to run on ahead while he paused for a chat with the visitor. "What brings you this day to King's Welcome?"

"No great matter," Mistress Gannett replied evenly. "I did but come over to enquire after Mistress Constant and to learn her commands."

Master Sandys stared at Mistress Gannett with an expression of the widest surprise.

"Why do you travel so far afield for your purpose?" he asked. "Have you not got Mistress Constant under hatches, as it were, at Flood's Folly yonder?"

Mistress Gannett felt a sudden sinking in the pit of her stomach and a sudden fluttering of the heart.

"Is not Mistress Constant at King's Welcome?" she asked, and her startled voice sounded queer and unfamiliar in her ears. "When did she leave it?"

Master Sandys stared at her with a puzzled forehead.

"What has come over you, Mistress Gannett? You know as well as I do when Mistress Constant quitted King's Welcome, for you accompanied her departure."

Mistress Gannett turned so white and looked so very much as if she were about to fall to the ground in a fainting-fit that the young man stepped promptly forward and caught her in his arms. But Mistress Gannett did not faint. The dizziness that had assailed her with that sudden shock dissipated and her common sense assured her that she had best keep all her wits about her. She quietly disengaged herself from the hook of Master Sandys' supporting elbow.

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked, with a voice that was firmer now, though it still quavered a little, "that

Mistress Clarendon Constant did not come hither four days ago to make a short stay with her ladyship?"

Master Sandys shook his head emphatically.

"Mistress Constant has not passed these gates," he protested, "since the day she fared in your fellowship to the mad land-ship."

Mistress Gannett could have reeled again at this information if the core of sound sense in her comfortable body had not assured her that this was no time for such cantrips.

"I must see my lady Gylford at once," she insisted. "I do not understand what has happened, but it can be no good happening. I must see my lady at once."

And as she spoke the good woman, with her heart in her mouth, pushed past Master Sandys and hurried up the avenue of elms at a greater speed than the widow of Plymouth's mayor had been known to take these ten years.

Master Sandys looked after her, thus bustling in unfamiliar scurry, with a sigh of apprehension. For all his scholarship he had a very tender regard for the beautiful Clarendon.

"I wonder what has happened to Mistress Constant?" he muttered. "It must be something serious to make Mistress Gannett consent to walk three miles to the hour."

Very deliberately he decided that it was his duty as well as his desire to ascertain the cause of Mistress Gannett's agitation. He whistled to the lodge-keeper's son, and having informed him, to his great disappointment, that he must ramble alone that afternoon, he turned on his heel in hot pursuit of the one-time mayoress.

But long before Master Sandys could catch her up, Mistress Gannett, pursuing what was for her a headlong pace up the avenue, found herself at the massive doors of King's Welcome. She straightway banged such a volley upon the oak as might very well have suggested to those within that once again a sovereign prince deigned to visit the ancient hall and demand the historic welcome. The doors had scarcely been opened an inch when Mistress Gannett breathed through them a demand to be conducted at once to the presence of my lady Gylford. But the porter, drawing a long face and shaking a solemn head, rebuffed the impatient visitor. My lady had, it seemed,

taken to her bed with a cold, and would be too busy ministering to her sneezing and her coughing and her spitting to welcome gentle or simple. Mistress Gannett was not to be so put off.

"Tell her ladyship," she said peremptorily, "that I come to her on an urgent matter concerning her ward, Mistress Clarendra Constant, which does not brook the delay of as much as a moment. Be assured therefore, fellow, that you stand between me and audience of my lady at your peril."

The door-keeper was too much abashed at the sturdiness of Mistress Gannett's carriage to oppose her with further denial.

"You must take it on yourself, then," he grumbled sulkily, "and absolve me if I come into displeasure with her ladyship for disturbing her in her sick-bed."

But even as he spoke, because he knew well enough the importance of Clarendra and her welfare to the wardress of King's Welcome, he was moving from his haunt and bawling for a maid to carry a message to my lady of Gylford.

A maid was soon found and despatched to return very swiftly with a summons to Mistress Gannett to follow her instantly into the presence of her ladyship. Mistress Gannett so following, with throbbing pulses, presently found herself in a vast, gaunt oak-pannelled bed-chamber, with a vast bed in the middle of its desert, like a catafalque, and in the middle of that vast bed, crowned with a night-cap of prodigious dimensions and propped by innumerable pillows, reposed the almost mummified relic of the age of the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

While Mistress Gannett, in spite of her anxiety, had sufficient control over her emotions to pause after passing the threshold and make a very profound obeisance, the withered old body on the bed jerked itself upright, the withered old face protruded from its bower of down and the withered old voice asserted itself in very sharp interrogation.

"What in God's name," she asked fiercely, "have you come to tell me about this little she-devil? What new folly has she committed for which she ought to be whipped?"

"May it please your ladyship," said Mistress Gannett,

"I do not know what Mistress Constant has done or has not done, for I do not know where she is."

"What in the devil's name," cried the old lady, who was somewhat addicted in her anger to mixing her invocations, "is your meaning? Is not the mad minion who has bewitched my kinsman in that hellicate landship of yours?"

"It is none of mine, your ladyship," Mistress Gannett replied with dignity, "but be it mine or be it thine or be it whose it may, Mistress Constant has not been within its walls for these four days past."

"For these four days past!" echoed the old lady with a scream, "then where has she been and where is she now? Tell me that, if you please."

"God knows," said Mistress Gannett solemnly, "and God also knows that I do not know. All I know is that four days ago there came a strange sailor lad to the"—Mistress Gannett was going to say house but substituted another word—"place with a message from Mistress Constant to say that she was going to visit your ladyship at King's Welcome for a few days. And Mistress Constant being, if I may say so, a bit flighty, I was not much surprised at the tidings."

"She has never been near the place!" shrieked my lady. "What can have happened to her, what can have become of her, what can we do?"

If Lady Gylford was now both thoroughly and reasonably alarmed by the news which Mistress Gannett had carried, Mistress Gannett, on her side, was not a whit less perturbed and distressed. For though she indeed was in no sense so directly responsible for the care and safety of Clenda as my lady Gylford, she had almost unconsciously developed an affection for the headstrong maiden which was much troubled by the amazing statement of the wardress of King's Welcome. Being of a more phlegmatic temperament than her ladyship she accepted the uncomfortable news more composedly. So there was a brief pause during which the mental processes of Mistress Gannett revolved slowly in their grooves while the haggard old woman huddled in the bed stared at her with wild eyes. Presently Mistress Gannett spoke.

"If I may make so bold as to advise your ladyship, I

think it would not be amiss for us to get a man's mind and a man's hand to help us in this trouble. God alone knows what has come to Mistress Constant, but if she is to be found she must be looked for by active seekers, and you and I, your ladyship, if I may say so without offence, are a little past the time for such enterprises."

"Hey dey," cried the old lady from the bed, "I would have you to know, good woman, that I count myself well-nigh as active as I was in the days when I was in that state of grace to dance and mask and ride a-hawking with the finest king in Christendom. But men have their uses"—here the old lady grinned, and then recalling the gravity of the occasion looked very grave and demure indeed—"and a man's wit and vigour might help us now, but it behooves us to go warily, for we would not have the disappearance of this girl made matter for countryside babble."

Mistress Gannett was as shocked at the thought as Lady Gylford could be and concurred heartily in her opinion.

"He that owns the outlandish house," she said, "is one Master Hercules Flood, one that has made his fortune upon the seas. He might well be of service to us in this matter, seeing that the young lady was his tenant, and was pleased to accord him her friendship."

The old lady in the bed crooked her eyebrows curiously at the words of Mistress Gannett.

"What of this fellow," she asked sharply, "this fellow with the name of the strong man? Was he often at the house, say you? Was the fool girl much in his company?"

"I believe he saw the young lady pretty often," Mistress Gannett replied cautiously, "but he did not, as it were, visit the house, if house you can call it. Mistress Constant was fond of taking her ease in a little orchard that was at some distance and it was here, as I understand, that Master Flood used to visit her."

Lady Gylford frowned again, more ferociously than ever.

"Have you ever seen this man, then?" she asked.

"I saw him no less than two days ago," Mistress Gannett replied. "He came up to the place by the way from the orchard, and I happened to be in the garden. He asked if Mistress Clenda was within as he had failed to find

her in the orchard. When I told him that the young lady had gone to King's Welcome he seemed mighty disappointed and asked if I knew when she was to return, and I told him that I did not know, but that I understood it would only be a few days. Thereafter he went away."

"What kind of a man was this mariner?" questioned the old lady in the bed.

"A fine figure of a man," replied Mistress Gannett, "taller than most and broader and very politely spoken."

"And where does this polite giant reside, since he was turned out of his house?" asked Lady Gylford.

"I believe that he lodges at the 'Dolphin,' which as your ladyship may know is the favourite house for seafarers," answered Mistress Gannett.

The old lady gave a grunt which suggested a very complete indifference to the "Dolphin's" reputation.

"Well," she said, "this is as strange a business as ever I heard. In the days of great King Harry girls did not play such pranks. But we have changed sadly for the worse. However we must do something to find the minx, and we shall want a man to help us, and above all we shall not want this matter to become food for gossip, so the man we need must be a true friend and discreet. Therefore my mind advises that we should incontinently send for Sir Batty Sellars."

The name of Sir Batty was pleasing to the listening ears. Mistress Gannett had been much taken with Sir Batty on the two occasions on which she had seen him, for Sir Batty made it a rule of his game always to be affable to women whatever their age or station.

"If you will take yonder hand-bell," said the old lady, "and ring it in the corridor we shall find some one to send."

Mistress Gannett did as directed. A servant promptly responded to the clangour, and in a few minutes Master Sandys at his own eager entreaty was riding at the top of his speed in the direction of Willoughby Homing bearing an urgent message to Sir Batty from the lady Gylford entreating to come at his quickest to King's Welcome.

"Now," said Lady Gylford, when her messenger had departed, "this is no time to lie slug-a-bed. I will get up and dress."

CHAPTER XXIX

WITHOUT HUE OR CRY

SIR BATTY, on account of his wound, had been keeping the house at Willoughby Homing. The hurt was but slight and his healthy flesh was soon mending, but Sir Batty believed in the exercise of a wide discretion where his welfare was concerned. Also there was another reason for his wishing to be whole again as speedily as possible. He did not at all desire to appear before Clarendra with an injured limb. Pity was the last feeling a man of his temperament desired to inspire in the bosom of the woman he admired, and it would have galled his pride woefully to think that Clarendra should become reminded of his defeat through such a visible sign. He had therefore the services of the best surgeon out of Tavistock, and he took much repose and lived very abstemiously with the agreeable result that his arm got better rapidly. After a couple of days he was allowed to be about the house; on the third day he was permitted to take the air in the garden. On the afternoon of the fourth day he was seated in a pleasant summer chamber, playing at cards with his host and his travelling companion, and playing with his usual ability for all that he had to play left-handed, when the game was interrupted by a servant with the announcement that Parson Sandys from King's Welcome was at the door and desired to speak with Sir Batty very urgently.

Almost Sir Batty's cheeks coloured; almost Sir Batty's left hand trembled, agitating its load of cards. A message from King's Welcome, his instant hope assured him, must mean a message from Clarendra. In truth Sir Batty had been more than a little piqued to think that no word had come to him from the fair maid of honour during the past three days. Even if no news of the encounter had come to her ears—and Sir Batty could not believe this likely—

he judged that the place he knew he held in her heart would have spurred her to summon him to her side. And now he felt sure that this was the summons although it came from King's Welcome and not from "The Golden Hart." She had quitted the land-ship, he told himself in the swift instant of thought that followed on the announcement of the arrival of Master Sandys. The hand which had almost trembled laid the cards down upon the table.

"I will see the fellow at once," he said and rose from his seat.

Jack Willoughby would have stayed him.

"Why not have parson in here," he suggested, "and spare yourself the fatigue of motion?"

Sir Batty shook his head.

"I thank you for your care, Jack," he said with a faint smile, "but this may prove to be a message for my private ear. We will resume the game in a minute."

But the game was not destined to be renewed.

It was very much more than a minute before Sir Batty returned to the room, and when he did return it was with a face so strangely white and drawn that honest Jack Willoughby rose to his feet in alarm and even the more composed Mr. Winwood showed concern.

"Good God, what is the matter?" cried Willoughby. "Have you heard bad news?"

"Bad news indeed," replied Sir Batty, dropping heavily into his seat. His left hand was shaking now indeed and the letter which it held quivered like a leaf. "I have here a missive from my lady Gylford which tells me that Mistress Constant has disappeared."

Jack Willoughby gaped at him with a mouth wide enough to swallow an apple. Mr. Winwood leaned forward quickly.

"What mean you by disappeared, Batty?"

"What should I mean by disappeared but disappeared?" Sir Batty answered with most unfamiliar sharpness. "The girl has gone, vanished, no one knows whither that should know. She is not at that damned ship-house; she is not at King's Welcome. My lady bids me attend on her and I ride at once. Will one of you accompany me? There may be much to do."

Both his friends declared that they would go with

him, and in a very few minutes the three were riding at the top of their speed towards King's Welcome, with Master Sandys following at a respectful distance behind them.

At King's Welcome the three friends found Lady Gylford waiting to receive them in a high state of agitation and anger. Immediately the visitors and their hostess took counsel together to consider what had best be done and how best to do it. The old lady, if aroused, was not at all flustered, and she told all she had to tell clearly and decisively. She could offer no suggestion as to the cause of Clarendon's disappearance, but she took it well-nigh for granted that it was due to some freakish impulse of her own, that might probably, or at least possibly, have its connection with some unsuspected love-affair. At this suggestion Sir Batty's brow darkened but he held his peace, for he was as convinced as ever was François of France that women are weather-hens and he a fool who puts faith in them. Lady Gylford went on to argue that the country was peaceable and law-abiding and that there was happily little reason to entertain any fear of foul play, though unhappily it was of course impossible entirely to exclude it. On one point Lady Gylford spoke very firmly and found her hearers wholly in agreement with her. She was convinced that, for a time at least, the matter should be kept as secret as possible and that recourse to the aid of publicity and the law should be postponed until they themselves there present had done their best to trace the missing girl, and so avoid a flagrant scandal.

In furtherance of this well-advised purpose my lady had already sent Mistress Gannett back to "The Golden Hart" with instructions to carry herself and conduct the household as if nothing had happened, and even, if any question were asked, to take upon herself the sin of telling a lie and roundly assert that Mistress Clarendon was indeed at King's Welcome. This much had been done and well done. The question now was, what next to do?

It seemed to Sir Batty that the earliest course to pursue was to make all possible instant and discreet enquiries in the immediate neighbourhood. He asked, in the first place, if Mistress Clarendon had formed many friendships in the

countryside. None, Lady Gylford assured him, none at least that she was aware of, except indeed that foolish and unfortunate acquaintance with the seafaring fellow who had erected Flood's Folly and who seemed to be as much surprised at the young lady's disappearance as they themselves were.

Sir Batty's forehead darkened again at the mention of Hercules' name. Without any evidence to support him, his instinct insisted upon associating the seafarer with the disappearance of the lady. He did not definitely put these suspicions into words at this moment but he announced that he would seek out his late antagonist and question him, while he advised that Jack Willoughby and Spencer Winwood should range the countryside and put privy questions to responsible persons.

Decision thus arrived at Sir Batty and his friends took swift leave of Lady Gylford and parted at the door of King's Welcome, each man riding on his special mission. Sir Batty, spurring his horse to top of speed, skirted the town, making for "The Golden Hart." He was in a sweat and his steed was in a lather when he flung himself from his saddle and demanded speech with Mistress Gannett. That good lady was instant in attendance, but she could tell Sir Batty nothing that he did not already know. She could recall no sentence, no half phrase, no lightly dropped word that could give the slightest hint as to Mistress Clarenda's reason for quitting "The Golden Hart," always assuming that she had quitted it with intention and of her own free will. All that Mistress Gannett could report was that on a certain morning—which was the morning after the pastoral buffoonery—Mistress Constant had gone to her favourite haunt in the orchard; that she had not returned to dinner, and that when Mistress Gannett went to seek her there was no sign of her save her lute and her book and the pillows that still bore the pressure of her form. On the same day a seafaring youth bore the believable message that Mistress Clarenda had gone to King's Welcome and on the following day Master Flood had paid a visit in the afternoon and shown chagrin at the young lady's absence.

No question that Sir Batty's ingenuity could devise

succeeded in eliciting any further clue from Mistress Gannett.

Baffled and angry Sir Batty mounted his horse again and hurried him back to Plymouth, making for the "Dolphin." The landlord, smoking his pipe at his yard gate, saluted a rider whom he instantly appreciated for a fine gentleman and was, at first, promptly responsive to questioning. But he had nothing to answer that gave Sir Batty satisfaction. The mention of the name of Master Hercules Flood seemed somehow to drown the landlord's mind in a depth of obtuseness not to be expected from his general air of alert intelligence.

Master Hercules Flood certainly had a lodging at the "Dolphin" and at the "Dolphin" Master Hercules Flood was always as welcome as the flowers in May, as the saying went. But Master Hercules Flood was not at the "Dolphin" at that present, and the landlord, scratching his head vigorously, protested that he had not the faintest idea where Master Hercules Flood might be. He might be aboard his ship and also he might not. He might have gone on a jaunt to one of the neighbouring towns. He might—in fact, the possibilities of Hercules' whereabouts were as varied as vague in the mind of the host of the "Dolphin." When Sir Batty, much exasperated, asked when Master Flood had last stayed at the "Dolphin," the landlord was as useless as before. He could not call to mind, he could not say exactly; he was so used to Master Flood a-coming and a-going that he really had no precise idea when he saw him last.

Although Sir Batty carried his mask of equability he was inwardly torn with emotions. There was rage at the disappearance of Clarendra, whom he certainly desired very hotly, and whom he came perhaps as near to loving as was possible for him. There was fear for her safety, for her life, for her honour. To these high conflicting emotions were now added a fretted sense of exasperation at the elusiveness of his search. There seemed to be no clue to follow, no finger-post to indicate. It would not be possible long to withhold the knowledge of the case from the civil authorities, yet there were many reasons which made Sir Batty eager that the present reticence should be per-

sisted in. It was no part of his purpose that his residence at Willoughby Homing, within a brisk ride of King's Welcome, should come to the ears of his Sovereign Mistress. That Sovereign Lady believed that her Master of the Lesser Revels was enjoying a holiday with his friend Mr. Winwood at Mr. Winwood's pleasure-lodge in Norfolk. Sir Batty had never directly said as much to his Sovereign Lady, but he had deliberately allowed her to infer as much, and had been at no pains whatever to contradict the inference. He could easily foresee and fear the displeasure of the Queen.

He was now on the point of turning from the "Dolphin's" door, when the host arrested him with a lifted finger.

"By Christopher!" he cried, "here in good season comes the very man you seek."

He lowered his lifted index as he spoke and pointed along the Hoe, and Sir Batty following his guide saw Hercules Flood riding slowly towards him astride of a black horse of a monstrous size. Sir Batty immediately pricked forward to meet him and the two riders encountered some few hundred yards from the inn gate. Hercules, on seeing Sir Batty, made him a courteous salutation and was for passing on, but Sir Batty reined in his steed with so evident an intention of staying his late antagonist that Hercules in his turn came to a halt.

"I am glad to see you about, Sir Batty," he said politely. "I trust that your hurt is well-nigh mended?"

He glanced, as he spoke, at Sir Batty's slung right arm. Sir Batty acknowledged the enquiry with an inclination of the head.

"I thank your courtesy," he replied, "my arm will soon be as good as ever it was. A clean hurt is soon whole, as the proverb goes." He laughed a little as he spoke, carelessly, and then quite suddenly, on the chance to take his suspected enemy off his guard, he questioned quickly. "Have you seen Mistress Constant of late?"

Hercules Flood regarded his interrogator with a perfectly unmoved countenance.

"Why there," he said, "is the very question that I was wishful to put to your knighthood. They tell me at the place which the country folk here about call my Folly

that Mistress Constant has gone all of a sudden on a visit to King's Welcome. I am just come from my house and hear that she has not yet returned. As I have not the honour to be acquainted with my lady Gylford, I fear it would be something venturesome and unmannerly to wait upon Mistress Constant at King's Welcome."

Sir Batty, looking steadfastly on the steady face of Hercules Flood, wondered more than ever, and suspected more than ever. But he felt that it was useless to betray suspicion just then. There was no flagrant falsehood in Hercules' speech, though every word might have been ingeniously brought together to foster a false impression.

"I am sure," he protested politely, "that my lady Gylford would be delighted to welcome within her walls a gentleman of so original a spirit as yourself."

With that he saluted and pushed onward, and Hercules leisurely continued his road to the "Dolphin."

Sir Batty rode quickly back to "The Golden Hart" where he learned from Mistress Gannett that Hercules Flood had spoken truth in saying that he had just, for a second time, visited his land-ship to renew his enquiries as to Mistress Constant. It even seemed that he had said to Mistress Gannett very much what he had said to Sir Batty as to the inadvisability of his waiting upon Mistress Constant at King's Welcome, owing to his lack of acquaintanceship with Lady Gylford.

Sir Batty frowned, shrugged his shoulders, impressed afresh upon Mistress Gannett the necessity for continued secrecy and discretion, and returned to King's Welcome with a sense of disappointment that was close akin to despair.

CHAPTER XXX

SECOND THOUGHTS

WHEN Hercules paid his next visit to Clarendon on the third day of her captivity he carried himself in the fashion of a polite host waiting upon a willing guest. Clarendon, shrewd enough to realize that nothing was to be gained for her by frowardness, matched her manner to his own, and the pair discoursed together as gaily and pleasantly as if they had been sitting in the warmth of the wind-sheltered orchard at "The Golden Hart" instead of in the lonely moorland castle of Mountdragon. When, after an hour that was dyed in the brightest colours of courtesy and friendship, Hercules rose to take his self-appointed leave, he delivered himself of this speech:

"Mistress Constant," he said, "since you are for the moment, will you or nill you, my guest, I can discover no advantage to either of us in standing on terms of stiffness and distance. So therefore, I entreat you, as the master of this house, to conduct yourself as if you were my willing instead of my unwilling guest. If you will consent, I should make bold to request the privilege of sharing your company at meal-times, as would surely be the case if you had been pleased to visit me of your own accord."

Clarendon's face wore an air of thoughtful approval. Indeed this suggestion of her gaoler's came to her as a welcome relief, for she who was used to companionship found little diversion either in solitude or in the society of Mistress Penfeather.

"Since we are for the time being compelled to abide under the same roof," she said slowly, "we may as well enliven the long hours with some show of fellowship. You must not think that I like you any the better or forgive you one jot of the wrong you have done me. But I weary in loneliness, and, since I can have no better company than

yours, I may as well accept it, such as it is, and make the best of it."

Hercules paid the young lady as profound a salutation as if she had made him the most flattering compliment in the world, couched in the most amiable terms.

"You are graciousness itself," he protested, "and I am indeed happy in your consent."

On this agreement they parted, to meet again under such custom of familiar intercourse as would be natural between a cordial host and a contented guest. There was no more hint of gaoler and prisoner than was inevitable in the fact that Clarendra's range was limited to a certain set of rooms in a certain moorland castle. The charming intimacy of the orchard close by "The Golden Hart" was renewed under conditions that made the intimacy at once more insidious, more bewildering and, in a measure, more delicious.

There are epochs in the history of most men and women when some certain space of days, otherwise insignificant and trivial, seems to expand, to exaggerate its endurance and importance, to impart to minutes the value of hours and to hours the magnitude of days. Such was the case with the days that immediately succeeded Clarendra's enforced habitation of Mountdragon. She was to outward seeming the honoured visitor of a most considerate and entertaining Castellan; one who was all activity and all anxiety to make her stay in the strange place as pleasing as possible.

If Hercules had been an interesting visitor when Clarendra reigned at "The Golden Hart," he proved an attractive host in the solitude of his stronghold. Though he had never been of a bashful carriage in those orchard hours, he was now more completely at his ease, more amiably conscious of his duty as a companion. At once a good talker and a good listener, he talked and talked well when she had a mind to be silent, telling her a thousand wonders of his travels in foreign parts; and he listened well when she had a mind to be talkative, and fed on the crumbs of her courtly gossip with the cheerful air of one that makes a magnificent repast. In a word, for the space of three days the oddly associated pair were, or seemed to be, the

best friends in the world and no stranger would ever have guessed, from seeing them or hearing them, how amazing was their relationship.

But if in those three days their friendship seemed to bloom too swiftly, like some tropical blossom, the conditions that fostered such friendship fostered also other thoughts on both sides of the seeming partnership. Hercules, being a man, believed in his simplicity that he was really gaining ground, and that, in consequence, the result of his reckless adventure would be the realization of his passionate hope.

Clarenda, on the other hand, quickened by her consciousness of deliberate duplicity, assumed for the purpose of gaining time, found to her surprise and also to her horror that her feigning was rapidly wearing a troublesome air of reality. When she was with Hercules she had honestly to admit that she delighted in his company. When she was alone, and at leisure to reflect upon her case, she found to her annoyance that she fell very speedily to judging herself in her conduct to Master Flood in the past, and finding herself guilty of grave fault in the matter. Reluctant as she was to admit any possible imperfection in her conduct she found herself constrained, much against the grain, to admit that in many ways she had behaved very badly to him, whereas—and here her native truthfulness asserted itself against her varnish of courtliness—Master Flood had, in all ways save one, behaved very well to her. As she pondered on this problem his manly figure seemed to loom with unnecessary largeness against the grey background of her prison, and it was with a shock like the sense of a stab that the girl suddenly realised what a place her gaoler had commanded in her imagination.

It alarmed her pride and rekindled her temporarily dormant sense of resentment to discover that she was beginning to look forward with eagerness and even with impatience to his daily appearance within the narrowed horizon of her life, and to regret very decidedly that moment when the hour struck at the closing of the day which deprived her of his company. He was a good gossip; she had to admit as much to herself; but the making of one amiable admission with regard to her gaoler led to her making others by brisk degrees which proved more and

more alarming. It was not merely, so she began to believe, because he was a good gossip that she was glad to have him come and grieved to have him go. Other men had afforded her entertainment in other days and she had seen them come and go with indifference or with a sense of regret so attenuated as scarcely to deserve the grave name. Consciousness crept over her spirit like a shadow that she was quick to welcome her captor and slow to bid him farewell, not because he was merry and pleasant and could discourse well on many pleasing matters, but simply and solely because he was Hercules Flood. When she consented reluctantly to make this confession to her soul she stood aghast at the weight of its significance.

Was there not a moment, she now asked herself, with a fierceness of shame that yet had a kind of sweet in it, when the essence of her nature urged her to respond to any appeal from the man to whom her hatred was dedicated? If he had made to take her in his arms, would she, so she questioned fretfully, have found in her mind the force to resist or to deny? To all these bitter self-enquiries she found no answer that was medicinable or palatable. Angrily she recalled how they had talked with all the sweet intimacy of friendship; how they had exchanged thoughts; how she had suffered him on taking leave to kiss her hand unchallenged. Truly it was no more than the civil salutation accorded to host and accepted by guest, but its incidence emphasized a perilous acceptance of the position of guest to host. She went hot and cold in horror at the thought; she felt as one feels that slides, smiling and unconscious, to the brink of sin; she shuddered to think that she had well-nigh accepted the pollution of surrender to her tyrant's terms. Hotly she determined to make an end of this shameful, shameless vacillation. She was resolved to be the conqueror in this quarrel, though she broke his man's heart and her woman's heart in the accomplishment of her resolve.

But Hercules knew nothing of these searchings of the spirit, and when he came to the great hall on the morrow to pay his daily visit to his fair prisoner, he did so with a high and hopeful heart. He believed that an understanding had been arrived at between two strong, proud, turbu-

lent spirits; that the eternal battle between man and woman had in this instance been concluded with an honourable peace; and that the purpose which had animated him to so strange and desperate a course would be triumphantly justified. But he had to confess to his soul, on the first moment of this new meeting with Clarendia, that something had changed in their world since yesterday. All that had spurred him to hope that the wild game had ended kindly, that the proud heart was willing to place itself in his keeping, seemed suddenly to dissolve and disappear as faint smoke fumes into the air. She was no longer vehement, wilful, petulant, passionate, yielding. Now she was amiable, with a point of malice in her amiability, cool in her carriage, fortified in a serenity that was half disdain and half defiance; in brief, another woman from the woman that had shewn herself so kindly on the previous day.

Although his instinct hinted that he had lost ground where it had been his belief that he had gained ground, he was still too primed with a joyous hope that had seemed a joyous confidence not to give that hope an airing and put his fortune to the test anew. Therefore, when they had passed through the gravity and formality of the morning's salutations, he spoke.

"Very dear lady, your presence here has made this gaunt old place like one of those enchanted castles they tell of in story-books, wherein knights and ladies find endless youth and taste endless joy. If my mind does not lie to me, I would fain believe that you have found your sojourn here less irksome than at first you feared."

He paused to look for some sign of encouragement in her eyes or on her lips, but he found none. Her face was steadfast in gravity; her eyes and mouth were quiet; she watched him with an indecipherable regard. He spoke again.

"I hope we have grown to be friends. In that hope I make bold to ask you once again the old question, will you be my wife? So far as a man's promise can assure another human being I promise, in the name of the love I bear you, that I will make you a happy woman."

His words were like soft fingers playing upon Clarendia's

heart-strings, but she hardened her heart against the music they strove to make. Still she observed him with cold implacable eyes, but when she spoke there was a certain softness in her speech that seemed to belie her coldness.

"Your offer is one that no maid in her reason would have the right to resent. Your offer is one that many a maid would welcome gladly, for no wise woman would deny that you are a proper man. But I will give you no answer now nor hereafter to your question while you hold me a prisoner, and sorely against my will. Give me my liberty. Carry me back in all regretful humility to King's Welcome. Then and then only I will be willing to hear your pleading and to give you my answer. Till I am free in my own right and choice of freedom, you shall find me very silent."

It may be that Clarendra hoped and purposed to put it into the mind of Hercules that if he did as she wished he would not, in the sequel, find her unkind. It may well be that she was resolved to be kindness itself if he came to her terms. Very certainly Hercules found himself for a moment caught in the sweet snare of her speech and ready to take the lure. The syllables of surrender hovered on his lips. Well nigh he was ready to kneel before her, to clasp her hand and kiss it in signal of allegiance. Then, suddenly, remembrance of the orchard close, and her trick, and the sneering, smiling faces of the men her friends crowded into his brain and warned his native doggedness not to trust her, but only to trust to himself and to the plan he had marked out. Though his eyes and his voice were still kind, as a lover's eyes and voice should ever be, obstinacy commanded him and denied her.

"No, no, sweet lady, you shall not cajole me so. I have brought you here, at my risk and to your little ease, on a pledge I made to myself and told to you. You are the mate Heaven made for me. I am the mate Heaven made for you. Let us understand one another gallantly with no more shilly-shally. Say that you will have me for your man and we will ride hence together at once, as happy a couple as sun could wish to shine upon."

The resolution in him rekindled resolution in her. If

her heart beat in time to his wooing, her brain commanded her to meet his bid for dominion with clash against clash.

So in an instant the heat of Clarendra's anger flamed up within her, consuming her sudden tenderness, withering her green regard. She had given her gaoler a chance to make his peace and he had disdained it; she was mad with herself for her offer and with him for his insolence of refusal.

"Let us talk no more on this matter," she said icily. "Be advised for good and all that so long as you hold me here against my will I will hold no parley with you. If it concerns you at all you may know that I esteem you a most ungentle gentleman, but I take it that you are too thick-skinned to wince under any scorn. If in your composition there are yet any dregs of honour, of courtesy, of good conduct, I would ask you at least to spare me your further company, for indeed, I do not find it alluring. But you are perhaps one of those that love to impose themselves where they know that their presence is detested."

Hercules flushed a little, for her words stung him more than he liked, although he was too stubborn to admit their justice. He made her a grave salutation.

"With your permission," he said, "I will continue to wait upon you each morning to enquire after your well-being. Beyond that visit I shall not trespass upon your privacy without your permission. But I hope——"

"Your hope is vain," she interrupted sharply.

Hercules bowed again and quitted the chamber.

CHAPTER XXXI

WINGS

THE long day passed dully for Clarendia. She ate, when food was served her, reluctantly and with indifference. She rebuffed, with a sullen disdain, all Deborah Penfeather's efforts to divert her with conversation. In good time the woman saw that her efforts were unavailing, and as she was under positive orders to humour and pleasure the young lady in all possible measure she was shrewd enough to guess that her discreetest course was to withdraw and leave the young lady to herself. She retreated therefore to the seclusion of Clarendia's sleeping-chamber, there to remain until such time as it might please Clarendia to go to bed. There was always a fire in this room, and by this fire Mistress Deborah sat and knitted persistently without troubling herself to do any thinking.

In the great room Clarendia had no knitting to beguile her save the knitting of her troubled thoughts into some kind of form and harmony. She sat for a long while like one in a stupour, but when the day began to darken her wits seemed to quicken. She shook herself out of her apathy, rose from her chair, and began to pace the great room restlessly from one end to the other. As she did so she remembered a ferret that her young brother kept in a cage in the stables. She used sometimes to watch it as it ran backwards and forwards in its narrow cabin, and she reminded herself now of that prisoned beast, and felt, what she had scarcely felt at the time, a sympathetic pity for its pitiful case. It wanted to be free and could not gain its liberty. She wanted to be free and could not have her wish. She chid herself even as she thought that thought. She told herself that she must not admit that she could not win her liberty. She assured herself that she must and would win it, not indeed by yielding

to her tyrant's terms, not by surrendering, as she had felt herself in such deadly danger of surrendering, to her tyrant's charm, but by baffling in some cunning manner that tyrant's plans.

How might this be done, she asked herself, seeking encouragement and inspiration by gazing on the picture of the great Queen? She recalled how on the first night of her captivity that now seemed so long ago, Hercules had told her that unless she had wings like a bird she could not hope to escape from her prison. Indeed it had seemed to her ever since, through all those years that were only days, as if he had spoken no more than truth. Now with a new eye of determination she reviewed all the loopholes. The great fireplace offered no opportunity. Even if she could climb its spacious chimney—which she could not—she would only carry herself to some higher point of the castle and find herself no better off than before. Thus was one seeming possibility pronounced impossible. Her next thought was given to the window. She went to it and almost mechanically leaned out into the sweet of the evening as she had often leaned out before in those year-long days and nights. But the sweet of the evening had no voice to speak to her hot heart and busy brain. Escape was now more fiercely and eagerly than ever the one purpose of her being, but even her fierceness and her eagerness could not refuse to see as she had seen before that the window offered her no way.

Below her the high rugged wall of the keep dropped to the moorland stretching away in all the beauty of its loneliness. There was no sign anywhere of habitation other than the castle itself or of the existence of human beings other than those who inhabited the castle. Clarendia gauged as well as she could the height of her window from the moor and guessed it at some sixty feet. Had she had a rope at hand she would have made the endeavour to evade by its aid, heedless of the hamper of her woman's gear. But though she sought with care she could find nothing in the room that could by any ingenuity be converted to the use and purpose of a rope. The hangings were of too stubborn a texture, even if she succeeded in cutting them into strips to lend their pieces to tying together. Clarendia

remembered that she had once heard how some daring maid escaped from school by tearing her body linen into strips and making a rope of the fragments, but she soon decided that if she did handle her smock so it would not provide nearly enough material for the purpose.

"Oh, for wings," she murmured to herself, her mind still running on Master Flood's mocking speech of so short a time ago that was so long a time ago, "oh, for wings!"

Even as she spoke the words, her wandering glance fell upon the trophy on the wall, the bow and arrows of the chase. She found her brain lazily linking the wings of her desire with the grey goose feathers that winged those shafts. Then all of a sudden her wits shook off their laziness and became alert and active. There indeed, ranged against the wall, were wings that might serve her well. She could not indeed bestride a clothyard shaft as a witch might straddle a besom and so launch herself into the free air. But she could at least by the aid of those arrows send her voice abroad so that men might learn of her captivity and set about to redeem her.

The trophy was out of her reach as she stood, but by dragging a chair to the wall and mounting on its seat, she could easily lay her hands on what she desired. In a few moments the long-bow and the quiverful of arrows were in her hands and she returned to earth with her spoils and hid them in a corner for the nonce. She turned swiftly to the table, for quills and ink and paper and wax were what she needed now.

Seating herself at the desk, she rapidly wrote these words:

"In God's name let him who finds this send word to my lady Gylford at King's Welcome that I, Clarendia Constant, am a prisoner in a castle somewhere on the moors."

She hurriedly made four copies of this missive, folded and sealed them. Going to her artillery she transfixed each of the letters with a shaft, pushing the impaled paper well below the barb. Then she took up the bow and tested it, found that it was fashioned of good and seasoned yew, and that the loosened string was still tuned and serviceable. Clarendia had known how to handle bows and arrows from her childhood; her young arms were strong; her young

muscles were supple. She faced no difficulty in what she was about to do.

Clarenda, with her bow and a shaft in hand, like a new Diana, pushed open the casements of the great window and leaned out into the shifting light. The moon had not yet flushed into vision; a few stars powdered the pale sky; it was night and yet it was not night; it was dusk but something more than dusk. The pungency of the moorland rose through the warm air like an acrid kiss. The suggestion of vast enveloping space seemed to enhance, if that were possible, Clarenda's renewed longing for liberty. At least she would lose no chance.

Grasping the great bow firmly in her left hand she nocked the arrow to the cord and drew with a steady easy tension the feathers to her ear. Then she released the string and the first of her messages flew, with a swiftness greater than the swiftness of any bird, out through the scented twilight and vanished into space. With such a methodical tranquillity as her forebear's archers showed at Cressy, Clarenda picked up her second arrow and sent it hurtling on its journey in another direction. Steadily and swiftly the third arrow and the fourth winged their way into the deepening darkness, aimed, so far as Clarenda could contrive it, to a different quarter of the card.

When she had shot her last bolt it seemed to Clarenda, stout-hearted though she was, that the warm evening air turned suddenly cold. It was the reaction of her strained senses after their desperate effort to obtain release from the domination that fascinated and alarmed her, and as she drew back into the room she found to her fierce chagrin, that she fell a-shivering. Hurriedly she closed the window; hurriedly she hastened to her bed-chamber to seek and seek in vain for sleep.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE FLIGHT OF AN ARROW

HERCULES was for the most part a man of a temperate habit, considering his bulk and vigour. He could on occasion, being ashore and in times of peace, jollify with the best, down-drink the thirstiest, and out-watch the stars with the most wakeful of roaring blades. Aboard ship or in hours of action he was as austere as any hermit, and would rather fight on a little bread and water than a deal of meat and wine. But the check he had just encountered fretted him into unfamiliar excess. He sat late at table with Griffith; the pair drinking deep and changing many tales of strange adventures to pass the teasing hours. Hercules was never one to unbosom his troubles. He spoke no word, he dropped no hint concerning his fair enemy, and Griffith, who had from the start acted as if the presence of Clarendia in the castle was a work-a-day matter of course, made no comment now as he had made no comment from the beginning. But he could see that his friend was troubled, and while he grieved at the thought, it did not seem to him unreasonable that his friend should seek consolation in abundance of Burgundy.

It was therefore with a heavier head as well as a heavier heart than usual that Hercules paid his morning duty to Clarendia on the morrow. But his wits were not so clouded that they failed to note a kind of change in the lady. She had returned to that cold graciousness which he hoped had vanished, but that was not the only change he discovered.

He had to confess to himself that her demeanour puzzled him not a little. There was an air of confidence in her carriage and of assurance in her regard which was in marked contrast to the vehemence of her behaviour on the previous day. The change did not suggest any resignation to her lot, any readiness to come to terms or to appeal

for freedom. She seemed at ease, serene, still disdainful and defiant indeed, but not with the disdain and defiance of the trapped and angry captive, but with the restrained disdain and defiance of one that waits in composure upon events.

He wondered a little by what process of mental argument Clarendra had persuaded or commanded herself to change her mood. But whatever the reason Hercules was too shrewd a student of humanity to augur that Clarendra would be likely to prove more compliant in her new mood than in her old.

After the civilities of salutation had been formally exchanged, Hercules, with his habitual directness, struck into the heart of the puzzle.

"Are you still of your yesterday's mind, lady?" he asked very gently, for indeed he was sorely grieved to think that they who as it seemed had so nearly come to terms were now so doggedly at loggerheads again.

Clarendra commanded a smile that was meant to exasperate and that did exasperate.

"I am of the same mind to-day as I was yesterday," she answered. "I shall be of the same mind to-morrow as I am to-day, and so on through all the to-morrows, till we live to be withered."

Hercules found himself blankly at a loss what to say, a failing that was of unusual happening with him. He could conjure no argument that might temper this head-strong lady. All that was sayable seemed to have been said, and he could do no more than stare with what he felt to be a bumpkin-like vacancy at the fair inscrutable face, defiant and mocking. A brisk knocking at the door brought a kind of relief to the tumult of his thoughts.

Hercules went to the door and opened it. He found himself face to face with Griffith.

"There is one below," said the Welshman, "who wishes to have speech with you. I think you would do well to see him at once."

Hercules' visage showed no surprise at this news though he felt that, under the circumstances, it was probably surprising. He turned back into the room and saluted Clarendra.

"I am summoned for a while by some household business," he said. "Have I your permission to leave your presence?"

Clarenda shrugged her shoulders.

"You are master here," she said, "and can come and go as you please. It is foolish to make a parade of ceremonial with a prisoner, but, so far as I have any voice in the matter, the less I have of your company the better I shall be pleased."

"You choose to be severe with your poor friend," Hercules replied gravely. "If I were in your place I think I should act otherwise."

"If I were in your place," said the girl sharply, "I should wear your nature and should therefore be as brutish and foolish as you have proved."

She dipped him a derisive curtsey and Hercules quitted the room in silence.

When Hercules stood in the passage with the door closed behind him, Griffith spoke again.

"There came a fellow to the gates just now," he said, "a country fellow of a somewhat clownish and sullen humour. He demands to speak with the lord of the castle."

"Did he deliver anything of his business with me?" asked Hercules.

Griffith shook his head.

"He will say nothing of his need save to the lord of the castle. That is the strain he harps upon. He carries an arrow with him."

"An arrow!" Hercules repeated in some surprise. "What does he do with an arrow?"

"I noted, when I first saw him," answered Griffith, "that he had something hidden under his cloak. So I made bold to examine him, as gentle as might be, for at first he seemed unwilling. But I prevailed upon him, and then I discovered that under the folds of his cloak he was hugging an arrow, and I gather that it is touching that same arrow that the clown desires to confer with you."

"This arrow," said Hercules, "sticks in my gizzard. What a devil does a man with an arrow want of me? Where is the fellow?"

"I have set him in the kitchen," said Griffith, "and there he sits grumbling and muttering like an angry cat."

"Bring him to my room," Hercules commanded. Griffith nodded and departed.

Hercules went his way to that corner of the castle where he had set up his quarters now that the best apartment had been surrendered to Clarendon. And as he went he wondered, more than it was his wont to wonder over unknown matters, what this business of the arrow might signify.

He had scarcely reached his room, a bare simple place very modestly furnished, before Griffith rejoined him, conveying a burly sunburnt countryman in a shepherd's smock, who carried an arrow in his brown right hand and surveyed it glumly. The moment he saw Hercules he began to speak.

"I have brought you this arrow——" he said, and no more for the moment, for Griffith clapped a hairy paw over his mouth and silenced him.

"Do not speak till you are spoken to," Griffith commanded. "Have you no kind of manners, countryman?"

Hercules laughed at the indignation of his henchman.

"Men of the West Country are independent folk, and stand little upon ceremony," he said. Then addressing the surly shepherd he asked, "Why do you bring me your arrow, friend?"

The shepherd agitated his angry face from side to side in denial.

"Nay," he grumbled, "it is no arrow of mine, and I wish I had never come acquainted with the plaguey thing. But I take it to be an arrow of yours."

"Why do you take it to be an arrow of mine, friend?" asked Hercules. He was frowning a little, not at the shepherd, but at his own puzzled thoughts and dawning suspicions.

"What other house is there in these parts for miles around?" the churl asked sourly, "save this same castle? And if it be your arrow I shall trouble you to pay for the hurt to my sheep."

"Your sheep!" Hercules echoed, much surprised.

"Aye," the man repeated. "I said my sheep and I mean

my sheep. As handsome a ram as ever butted, but none the handsomer for having an arrow sticking out of his rump."

"Tell your tale plainly," said Hercules. "In the first place, where found you this arrow?"

"As I tell you," replied the shepherd, "in the tail-end of my ram. I was sitting, last night as ever was, snug enough in my hut a-watching of my sheep, when it seemed to me that I saw something drop from the air into the sheep-fold—it was a clear starlit night—and thereafter all the sheep began to run about as if they were crazy, and their bleatings and the barking of my dog were enough to deafen a body. Well, I caught up my lanthorn and hurried to the pen, and there was my ram running about like a mad thing with a new tail to him and this tail was no other than this same arrow that I hold in my hand. I take it that the bolt was well-nigh spent when it came my way or it would have killed the poor innocent beast for certain. But he is none the better for his hurt and I call upon you to make good to me."

"Here is a strange tale," said Hercules. "But what makes you think that it is my arrow or that I and mine have no better business to mind than to go shooting arrows at all adventure into your sheep-fold?"

"There is no accounting for the humours of great folk," said the shepherd gruffly, "nor how they may please to divert themselves. But whoever fired that arrow had a reason for the shot, and here, as I take it, the reason is."

As the shepherd spoke he pulled off his hat and drew from it a piece of folded paper that had been torn asunder.

"This piece of paper travelled with the arrow," said the shepherd. "It carries writing with it, but I am no scholar and know not its meaning. Belike your honour is wiser than I."

A curious smile had floated over Hercules' face when the shepherd produced the paper, and he nodded his head as one that begins to understand a riddle.

"Give me that paper, my honest friend," he said. "I make no doubt that I shall have skill to decipher it, if it be written in any familiar speech."

He held out his hand as he spoke, and the shepherd,

with some reluctance, consented to transfer the piece of paper from his custody to that of Hercules.

"Touching that ram of which I spoke to your honour," he hinted.

"Have no fear," said Hercules. "If this arrow came from this house, as indeed I begin to believe, good gaffer ram shall be satisfied, I promise you."

As he spoke Hercules carefully unfolded the torn and soiled piece of paper, smoothed it out on the table before him, and read its contents in one rapid glance. Then he burst into a great fit of laughter that startled the shepherd and made Griffith stare at his friend, as if eager to share his entertainment. Hercules thrust his hand into his pouch and produced a gold coin.

"Here," he said, tendering the piece to the shepherd, who took it eagerly, "is an ointment to heal your ram's hurt. I recognise this arrow as mine and I know who winged it. It was all done in jest, good shepherd, so make my apologies to honest gaffer ram. And so good morning to you."

The shepherd, fondling his gold coin affectionately and stuttering a profusion of thanks, was escorted from the room by Griffith and dismissed from the castle, to return to his sheep with a lighter heart than he bore when he had quitted them. Griffith, eager for knowledge as to the arrow and the cause of Hercules' mirth, hurried back to the room he had just left, only to find that Hercules was no longer there.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A COURTLY COMEDY

WHEN Clarendra was left alone she turned to the open window and, leaning there, looked out over the waste of moorland, spreading to the distance, like an illimitable sea. The lonely beauty of the prospect had no charm for her. It seemed only to emphasise her bitter sense of captivity, but it had the further effect of sharpening her longing for her lost liberty. Gazing over the green space below her she was wondering whither her last night's archery had carried, when the sound of footsteps in the room roused her from her meditations and she turned to find herself again face to face with Hercules Flood. His face was radiant with smiles, his eyes were bright with mirth, as if he had just heard the best news or the best joke in the world. His left hand, carried behind his back, held some object which she could not see.

Clarendra stared indignantly at the smiling face of her captor.

"Am I never to be left in peace?" she asked angrily.

"I entreat your forgiveness," said Hercules, "if I appear before you so soon again, but I have something to show you which I hope may amuse you as much as it has amused me."

As he spoke he brought his left hand forward. It was holding an arrow, which Hercules dropped on the floor at Clarendra's feet.

"I seem to make a habit," Hercules said pleasantly, "of offering you pointed weapons."

Clarendra flushed hotly and her heart seemed to beat with such vehemence that she could not command her speech. It was plain that one of her winged messengers had come home to roost.

"I admire your wit," Hercules continued; "I applaud your

ingenuity." As he spoke he drew from his pouch the mis-sive which had been attached to the arrow and showed it to her. "It is a pity that your message went no further than the leg of a ram and the hand of a letterless shepherd."

Clarenda would have liked dearly to dash her clenched fist into the drolling face before her. But she controlled her itching fingers and forced herself to speak with a relatively calm utterance.

"You deceive yourself," she said, "if you think that I have shot my only bolt or that I am heart-broken over your taunts at a single failure."

"Indeed I do not taunt you," Hercules replied. "In all honesty I admire your cunning, which deserved, at least in this instance,"—and as he spoke he pushed with his foot the arrow where it lay on the floor—"a better success. May I ask how many shafts so freighted you have dispatched?"

"You may ask," said Clarenda, "but I shall not tell you. Find out for yourself if you can."

Hercules made her a grave bow.

"I shall do my endeavour," he assured her. "But I think that in the meantime I must put a ban upon your archery practice."

He straightway did what Clarenda had done the previous evening. He drew a chair to the wall and mounting on it brought down the bows and arrows and made a bundle of them under his arm, while Clarenda watched him in silence.

Then he again addressed her.

"Lady," he said, "I will never consent to call you an enemy whatever you may choose to call me. But I will say this much, that you make a gallant antagonist, and that if a nimble wit could set you free you would very soon be at liberty. Yet I entreat you to remember that your best path to freedom lies by the way of the altar, the benediction and the consent which are, as one might say, the A B C of the prologue to a happy matrimony."

Clarenda made a grimace.

"I do not think you will be so merry," she said, "when you stand beneath the gallows with the rope about your

neck and the parson is buzzing his homilies into your ears. You will, as I hope, be too busy in looking at my laughing face."

"You have a high spirit," Hercules commented with a smile. "Lord, what a noble pair we should make. I swear that her gracious Majesty could do no better deed than to give us some fat island of the Indies wherein we might reign as king and queen."

Clarenda glared at him with a fury which Hercules deprecated with a wave of his disengaged right arm.

"I will say no more on that head just now," he politely protested, "and I will leave you to your reflections for the present. Will you in the meantime, I beseech you, tell me if there is anything I can do that will serve to add to your comfort?"

"I suppose," Clarenda said, "it would be idle for me to suggest that you should anticipate the stroke of justice and hang yourself out of hand."

Hercules agreed cheerfully.

"That would be quite useless," he said pleasantly, "the only halter for which my neck has a fancy is the marriage noose."

"You are truly a fellow of one idea," Clarenda commented contemptuously. "I protest it is almost a pity that you should be baulked."

"Only I do not mean to be baulked," retorted Hercules. "When you have had leisure for consideration I will wager my emerald thumb-ring against the least pin about your person, that you will think better of my wooing. And once again, is there anything, apart from this chat about halters, that I can do to pleasure you?"

"Why, for the matter of that," Clarenda answered, "if you have any books in this gaunt place I could contrive to divert myself until my freedom comes along."

"Books!" said Hercules, and shook his head somewhat solemnly. "I fear me that we are not enriched with a library as yet. I marvel that Philemon did not think of it, but indeed I have, in all my life, had little leisure or inclination for reading."

Even as he was speaking the name of Philemon recalled something to his memory and he slipped his hand into

the breast of his doublet, and drew out a small and rather crumpled pamphlet.

"I have here, indeed," he said doubtfully, "a certain small book which a friend of mine who is wise in such matters assures me is most excellent reading though I have not yet verified his assurance. I fear me I have used the cover, so I cannot tell you the author's name, but truly that is of little moment. It is what a man does, not what he is called, that should count in this world."

As he spoke he handed the little book to Clarendia, who received it disdainfully and laid it upon the table hard by. Then he made her another ceremonious bow and left the room.

Clarendia remained for a little while looking after him and wondering for the thousandth time why it had pleased Providence in its wisdom to bring her into the way of this madman and thus deliver her into his power. Then, because she had nothing better to do, she picked up the paper book and began to read in it, at first with an air of contempt but soon with a livelier interest. It was a play-book, it was a comedy, and the characters amused her, and she liked their courtly language and their courtly humour. She was so deep in the concerns of the King of Navarre and his misogyny, and the interruption of Rosaline, that, for a while, she forgot her cares.

CHAPTER XXXIV

PHILEMON INTERVENES

THE mind of Hercules was not so devoid of care as he could have wished it to be, when in the solitude of his chamber he meditated upon his position. Not since the days when a shepherd who was a King's son carried off by force or favour the Daughter of the Swan, had abductor been more flustered. Though he had undoubtedly, in this adventure, allowed his emotions to dominate his reason to a degree that was very unusual with him, he still believed, as he had believed in the hour of action, that he had acted for the best. He was aware, when he planned to kidnap, that he ran a grave risk, but he chose to run that risk, first because he was too hotly in love to give up the woman whom he called his woman, and secondly because he was confident that a little breathing space would suffice to enable him to win wholly what was half won already. Even now neither the stubbornness of Clarendra's renewed refusal nor the craft of her subterfuge served much to dash his spirits. He entertained a hearty admiration of the girl's cunning and he still cherished a wholesome conviction that time and assiduity would still overcome the girl's refusal.

The only matter that troubled him was the too early bruiting abroad of the fact that Clarendra was in captivity at Mountdragon. He had known of course from the beginning of the business that he could not hope to keep the fact of her imprisonment indefinitely concealed, but he plumed himself upon the wariness of the precautions he had taken to keep it close as long as possible. And now this business of the arrows seemed to threaten the possibility of a revelation much too early for his interests.

The first thing to learn was the fate of the flown arrows. Hercules had guessed, from an examination of the quiver,

that four had been launched. He had promptly sent a pair of retainers to beat the moor in search of the missives but neither of his emissaries had yet returned and Hercules sat moodily enough in solitude, wondering if indeed his adventure were drifting towards unforeseen and detestable catastrophe.

While he was thus drenched in reflections, like a River God in his stream, Griffith entered the room and dissipated the mood with news that Philemon Minster was on horseback at the Dragon's Head and desired to speak with him.

"Admit him," he cried with alacrity, welcoming the tidings. But when Griffith had departed he fell to musing as to how Philemon had discovered that he had betaken himself to Mountdragon. These musings were interrupted by the entrance of Philemon himself, escorted by Griffith, who immediately quitted the room and left the two men alone together.

The quick glance of Hercules instantly informed him that for some reason or other all was not well with Philemon. As he entered the room his limp was more pronounced, as was always the case when he was under the influence of some strong emotion. Also his face was drawn and pale, and the thin scholarly lips were tightly set and the high scholarly brow was furrowed.

Hercules greeted his friend with outstretched hand, but Philemon did not accept the proffered clasp.

"I have sought you to-day," he said slowly, with the air of one who weighs his words, "on a matter of some gravity."

"So I should judge from your countenance," Hercules answered, viewing him quizzically. "You are as solemn as if you were going to preach me a sermon." He paused for a moment, and then added, with a shrewd glance at his friend's face, "Perhaps you are."

Philemon was not to be moved from his formality by his friend's banter.

"I am come," he said, "not to preach you a sermon but to ask you a question."

"Ask what you will, dear Philemon, and I will give you an answer if I can."

He had already begun to guess what was coming, and

Philemon's question, when it was put, did not take him by surprise.

"Is Mistress Clarendra Constant a prisoner in this castle?" Philemon asked, with his grave eyes fixed on the face of Hercules.

Hercules whistled a few bars of a sea-song, surveying Philemon the while with a smiling face. Then instead of directly replying he retorted with another question.

"Has an arrow come your way by any chance?"

Philemon nodded.

"I was riding on the moors this morning," he said, "and went further afield than is my wont, with, it may be, some faint purpose to look at Mountdragon. As I rode I came upon an arrow lying upon the grass."

"And to that arrow," said Hercules cheerfully, "a piece of paper was attached."

"Yes," said Philemon, "a piece of folded paper which I opened and read."

He thrust his hand into the breast of his doublet as he spoke, and brought forth another of Clarendra's missives. Hercules greeted the familiar object with a smile.

"Shall I read you the letter?" Philemon asked. Hercules made a deprecatory gesture.

"You may spare yourself the pains," he said, "for I'll wager that I know the contents."

"In that case," pursued Philemon, "I have to repeat my former question, though indeed I fear me it is already answered. Is Mistress Clarendra Constant a prisoner in this castle?"

"Dear Philemon," said Hercules, with great urbanity, "if any other but yourself made bold to ask me such a question I should very probably tell him to go to the devil, and very possibly assist him in that direction if he persisted in his curiosity. But with you it is different, and so without any further beating about the bush, I will answer you frankly with a yes."

A look of stern reproach stiffened Philemon's features and there was a rising anger in his voice.

"Though I feared that answer before I came here," he said, "and though I expected it since I came here, I still do not find that I am answered. Do you really mean me

to believe that you are holding this young gentlewoman here against her will, that you are making her a prisoner?"

"I am holding Mistress Clarendon Constant here against her will," Hercules agreed composedly. Philemon's cheeks reddened with indignation.

"Have you gone mad?" he cried, "that you can commit such villainy? I can hardly believe your admission."

"Yet it is true, none the less," Hercules replied with the same amiable candour. "I had not wished the matter to be blown abroad thus early, but the young lady—I must say it to her credit—was too clever for me and her device of the arrows has, in a manner, interfered with my plans."

"Great God!" protested Philemon. "Do I stand here and listen while one that was my dear friend confesses himself guilty of such infamy with so much coolness?"

"One that was your dear friend," Hercules repeated reproachfully. "I hope I am still your dear friend, Philemon, and shall ever continue so to be. But I would have you to note that I do not confess myself guilty of any infamy."

"Do you play with words?" said Philemon. "What has come to you that you carry yourself thus? You admit that you hold an honourable gentlewoman prisoner in your house, that she is forced to make her piteous appeal against you, and yet you have the boldness to maintain that your conduct is not infamous."

"Dear friend," said Hercules quietly, "because you are Philemon Minster, whom I love, I listen to your questions, reproofs and judgments with a patience which I think is not uncommendable. But if I do not answer all your questions, or accept all your reproofs, or admit all your judgments, the reason is, if I may say so without offence, that you do not happen to know what you are talking about."

"I know," said Philemon hotly, "that a young and beautiful maid is at this present, by an act of violence, a captive in your power, very desperately against her will, and that this is a deed, at once as cowardly as base, which I could never have believed that the Hercules Flood whom I loved, aye, and worshipped, could have committed."

"I am glad," said Hercules in the same even tone, "to know that I have had your good opinion in the past. I am

grieved to hear that I have it not in the present and apparently shall not have it in the future. But I would still suggest to you, dear Philemon, that this is a brawl, or a quarrel, or a duello, or whatever you may be pleased to call it, between one man and one woman, with which you have nothing whatever to do."

"I take leave to disagree," cried Philemon. "A man is rash who intervenes in a dispute between man and wife, but this is not the case here, as I take it. You are not wedded to Mistress Constant."

"I am not wedded to Mistress Constant," said Hercules tranquilly, "but I am going to wed her very shortly."

"Do you mean," cried Philemon in a white fire of wrath, "that you are going to shame her into marriage with you?"

"Dear Philemon," Hercules answered gently, "I mean what I say and I mean no more than I say. I am sorry that you ever blundered into this business, and I should advise you to blunder out of it again as quickly as may be, for it is very plain that you do not understand Mistress Clarendra Constant, and that you do not understand me."

"Very certainly I do not understand you," retorted Philemon, "but very certainly I understand this much concerning Mistress Clarendra Constant, that she is in captivity and that she cries for her liberty to all honourable men, and that I am glad to think that I still call myself an honourable man."

"And what," asked Hercules in a slightly bantering voice, "does your honourability propose to do in the matter?"

"I propose," replied Philemon, "to lay this letter before the Mayor and justices of Plymouth, with all the information I can give as to this infamous abduction, and to stir all the strength of the law for the rescue of this lady."

"Do you indeed," retorted Hercules. "You certainly play a bold game seeing that you are at this present within the walls of my dwelling."

"Hercules, Hercules," said Philemon, with a sob in his voice, "I am indeed in your power, and if you have a craze for making prisoners there is no more to be said. But I warn you face to face that I am not so simple as you seem to think. When I found the poor lady's appeal this

morning I rode straight back to Plymouth and wrote divers copies of her letter which I placed in such hands to be made public if I were not returned to my dwelling by a certain hour. So you can do what you please to me, for I truly believe that the safety of the lady is assured."

Hercules surveyed Philemon with a gravity dappled with amusement. Here was a man that compared to himself was as a straw compared to an oak, and yet this trifle could beard him, could defy him, could, for the moment at least, defeat him. But indeed it was no news to Hercules Flood that it was not brawn and muscle alone that sufficed to govern the world. The cunning of a stripling, he might have reminded himself, as expressed by a stone in a sling, was sufficient for the undoing of a giant. Very promptly he prepared himself to make the best of the situation.

"Philemon," he said, "you ought to know me better than to believe that I would molest you in any way, although it may please you to molest me in a matter of which you are pitifully ignorant. But I can assure you that you are free to go hence as you were free to come hither, and that when you have crossed my threshold I shall do my endeavour not to bear you a grudge for making a fool of yourself."

"You speak like a riddling sphinx," cried Philemon impatiently. "Answer me this one question and by your answer I will abide. If Mistress Clarendra were in this room at this moment and knew that it rested with her to go forth into freedom with me, or to rest here in captivity with you, which course would she follow?"

"Undoubtedly," replied Hercules, with the unruffled good-humour that he had maintained during the whole of the interview, "Mistress Clarendra would decide to go with you."

"I am answered," said Philemon, "and there is no more to be said. I go hence, Master Flood, in the full resolution to do all that is in my power to rescue this unhappy lady."

"Go in peace," observed Hercules calmly, and with that benediction ringing in his ears, Philemon quitted the room and the castle and made his way as speedily as he might in the direction of Plymouth town.

When Philemon found himself riding again over the

moor with the bewildering memories of the morning humming in his head, he took his emotional spirit by the throat, as it were, and compelled it to consideration. Now that he knew for sure from Hercules' admission that Clarendon Constant was indeed a prisoner at Mountdragon he assured himself that it was his duty, as regarded the effecting of her release, to act with all possible circumspection. He had talked big to Hercules of an appeal to authority in Plymouth, but now, in the sobriety of his lonely ride, he thought better of that particular enterprise. It was not merely Clarendon's person—so he reflected—that was to be redeemed from Mountdragon: it was her good name that was likewise to be rescued unsullied. This was impossible if the good town were roused; wherefore Philemon, in his prudence, bethought him of my lady of Gylford and resolved with all immediate speed to wait upon her and make her acquainted with the facts of the case.

When Philemon arrived at King's Welcome and informed the majordomo that he desired speech with her ladyship on a matter of urgent moment, his wish was gratified after a very brief delay. He was ushered into the old lady's presence and found her seated in conclave with three gentlemen, whom he immediately recognised as the opponents of Hercules on an earlier day. The three gentlemen rose to their feet, observing him curiously. Before he could utter a word Lady Gylford, guessing what must be the business of any urgent visitor, had questioned him, shrilly imperious.

"In God's name, sir," she cried, "have you come here to speak of my ward?"

"I bring ill news of Mistress Constant," Philemon answered. Then, with all convenient brevity, he told his strange tale, to which his audience harkened with darkening faces and angry eyes. He had barely spoken his last word when Sir Batty broke into a rage of imprecation, very strange to his companions who knew his familiar calm.

"Let us rouse the countryside," he cried at last, after he had eased his heat a little. "Let us summon the gentlemen of Devon to a leaguer that we may take this castle by storm and hang its master before his own door."

Winwood and Willoughby, carried away by the news and

the vehemence of their friend, seemed to be very much of his mind and temper, but Lady Gylford promptly blew cool upon their impulse.

"Gently, sirs, gently," she admonished. "I commend your spirit, but I would have you to recall that we have this mad, unhappy girl's good name to consider. If we had to go warily before and avoid bruiting abroad the fact of her disappearance, we must go more warily still now that we learn of her whereabouts. Rouse the countryside and you may indeed set the damsel free, but, to my mind, she will be a stained maid in the public judgment."

The others agreed, as they could not help doing, with the wisdom of the old lady's words, which jumped with Philemon's opinion, and the company set to work to devise some shrewder counsel. After a little talk it was decided that Philemon—this was his own request—should ride instantly at hot speed to London to carry the ill tidings to my lord of Godalming, and be guided by the ripeness of his mind. In the meantime Sir Batty, accompanied by his friends, should hasten to Mountdragon, under a flag of truce, as it were. There Sir Batty should demand in the Queen's name—finding justification for this in being a Court officer—speech with Hercules Flood, call for the surrender of the damsel and failing this, try to obtain sight of Clenda and assurance that she was well treated.

This plan of campaign had been scarcely formulated before it was put into execution. Philemon drained a goblet of wine to hearten him for the start of his long journey, and within a few minutes the four gentlemen were a-horseback in the courtyard of King's Welcome and my lady Gylford standing on the threshold to wish them God-speed in the business. Each of the gentlemen from Willoughby Homing was attended by an armed and mounted servant. Philemon, because of the haste with which he had taken action, travelled alone. The party rode for a while together, the gentlemen interchanging little speech, for their thoughts were too hot and wild to find easy expression. Presently at a point of the main road they divided, Philemon spurring headlong eastward with London for his goal, and the party from Willoughby Homing galloping at full speed over the moors in the direction of Mountdragon.

CHAPTER XXXV

MINE ENEMY AT THE GATE

BY the time that the three gentlemen came within sight of Mountdragon Sir Batty had recaptured his habitual nonchalance and his face carried its wonted mask of calm. He had neither spoken nor halted since the parting from Philemon, but now at the first view of the castle he drew bridle and his companions did the like. The three servants who had kept at an even distance behind their masters during the gallop across the moor, now halted in their turn and sat huddled together wondering, it may be, as to their errand and waiting on command, and very certainly surveying the stronghold with more indifference than their superiors. To these indeed Mountdragon was of staggering concern. Sir Batty had never seen the fort before, and till that day had never heard of it. Spencer Winwood was in like case. Jack Willoughby knew indeed that there was an old ruined castle on a tor in the moorland. Thanks, however, to his absence in London and the slow travel of news across the country, he had no knowledge of its rejuvenation, and he stared at it in consequence with more astonishment than either of his friends.

The ancient keep of Mountdragon, which Philemon Minster had been at such pains to patch up and make habitable, stood on the summit of a high tor of a peculiarly rugged and inaccessible character. At a little distance from it, in the direct line between Mountdragon and Plymouth, another hill of equal height swelled from the level of the moorland at a very gentle angle till its crest faced the altitude on which the builders of Mountdragon had set their foundations. At this point the approaching slope, whether by some cataclysm of nature or by the handiwork of man, broke sheer away into a wall-like face, leaving a great gap of flat moorland that formed a kind of moat between itself

and the rugged and well-nigh impregnable mound upon which Mountdragon was perched. This great gap was originally spanned, by those that first builded Mountdragon, by a drawbridge which united the main gate of the castle with the summit of the hill that so suddenly ceased to be a hill. This drawbridge Philemon in his task of restoration had recreated, a light and easily workable bridge that one man could handle and that linked the two hills. The hill on which the castle stood was popularly known as the Dragon's Hump, and that to which the drawbridge extended was called the Dragon's Head.

Now Sir Batty spoke.

"I make little doubt," he said, "that I shall be admitted into yonder castle and afforded speech with its rascal master, but it is less likely that we shall all be suffered to enter. My actions within must needs be guided by circumstance, but if it should chance that the great gate be left open hold yourselves in readiness, on a summons from me, to make a dash for entry."

He did not wait for any answer from his companions, but taking agreement as implicit with direction, he put spurs to his horse and the cavalcade quickly covered the space between it and Mountdragon. As the horsemen approached the top of the gap between the Head and the Hump they reined up at some little distance from the edge. Sir Batty, advancing to the platform, drew from his bosom his kerchief and fluttered it in the air above his head, symbolic of the concerted flag of truce.

Almost instantly the black head of Griffith appeared in the aperture by the side of the gate tower and the big voice of Griffith bawled at them across the abyss, demanding what they wanted.

"I ride hither," shouted Sir Batty between his palms, "in the Queen's name, demanding present audience with Master Hercules Flood, that is keeper of this castle."

"And who might you be," Griffith questioned grimly, "that presume to demand anything of Hercules Flood?"

"Tell Master Flood," Sir Batty called, "that Sir Batty Sellars, whose name is not unknown to him, asks for immediate speech with him. I make bold to believe that he will guess the meaning of my errand."

Griffith emitted a sound between a snort of defiance and a sniff of disdain.

"I will take your message," he said curtly, and his shaggy head disappeared from the embrasure. Sir Batty and his friends stayed on the Dragon's Head in silent expectation for some minutes. Then the shock head of the Welshman reappeared at the opening.

"Sir Batty Sellars," he said gruffly, "can enter Mount-dragon and speak with its lord."

Even as Griffith spoke there was a turning of windlass and a creaking of chains as the drawbridge began slowly to sway from its lodgment towards its resting-place on the further side of the gap. While it descended Sir Batty swung himself from the saddle and advanced, leaving his party where they had halted and where they now remained, watching his conduct with anxious eyes and anxious minds. They saw the drawbridge touch the hither lip of the gap; they saw Sir Batty leap on to its planks even before it had reached its mooring; they saw Sir Batty pass along it and disappear within the courtyard of the keep. Also they saw that the drawbridge remained lowered and that the great gate of the castle remained open as if disdainful of their presence.

Spencer Winwood turned to the serving-men, who were now close behind, and directed them in a low voice.

"Be prompt," he commanded, "to do as we do. See to the readiness of your weapons and the readiness of your hands, for I can make no straight guess as to the end of this enterprise."

Sir Batty's man, as representing the others, and as tacitly recognising Mr. Winwood's right to command in the absence of his master, nodded his head and almost mechanically eased the short sword at his girdle and looked to the pistols in his holsters. Thereafter the little party sat in their saddles staring at the blank face of Mount-dragon across the space, with its gaping mouth, and wondering what was going to happen.

In the meantime Sir Batty, crossing the drawbridge and entering the courtyard through the great gate, found himself confronted by Griffith, who in a surly tone bade him follow. Duly following, Sir Batty mounted a winding

stair, paced a corridor, passed through a door which Griffith suddenly flung open, and found himself in a fair and spacious chamber and face to face with Hercules Flood.

Hercules greeted his visitor with a smile in which that visitor discerned rather a politely veiled derision than a proclaimed defiance.

"This," said Hercules, "is an honour that I was coming to expect."

"I do not come to honour you," replied Sir Batty sharply, "for I esteem you too deep in dishonour to command aught from me save scorn. I come to demand the liberation of an unhappy lady who is now a prisoner in your hands."

"Do you so," Hercules replied coolly. He motioned to Sir Batty to be seated, but Sir Batty ignored the proffer and spoke again.

"You lied to me at our last meeting when I challenged your knowledge of the whereabouts of Mistress Constant."

"You lie when you say so," Hercules retorted, but without show of anger. "I remember the terms of our talk very well, and that I told you nothing more than the tale I had been told by the good woman at 'The Golden Hart.'"

"None the less you deceived me," Sir Batty persisted, "for you knew that I sought the lady in great anxiety of spirit."

"Very truly I knew as much," Hercules agreed cheerfully, "but I did not wish you to find her."

"I have found her now," Sir Batty said, and strove to stifle the rising anger in his voice, "and I call upon you to set her free."

"You call in vain," Hercules answered composedly. "In Mountdragon it is I who give command, not I who take command. So I trust that you will not consider me inhospitable if I suggest that you should go your ways."

"Have you considered," Sir Batty asked, with forced deliberation, "what the consequences of this crime may prove to you?"

"I do not choose to defend my conduct to you," Hercules responded with a persistent good-humour that exasperated Sir Batty, "but I am willing to assure you that

I am not accustomed to act without some measure of foresight."

"I wonder if your prevision foresees the gallows?" Sir Batty asked with a sudden fierceness.

Hercules shrugged his shoulders.

"Do not let me detain you any longer from your friends," he urged affably.

Sir Batty looked as if he felt baffled by the imperturbability of Flood. Then a new thought spurred him to new speech.

"How can I go back to my friends," he asked, with a heat that was real enough, though he meant it to seem no more than well-aped, "with no news but yours of Mistress Clarendon Constant. What proof is there for me and for them that you have not cruelly misused her, shamefully abused her, starved her, beaten her, God knows what——"

Hercules interrupted him with a storm in his sea-coloured eyes.

"You have my word."

But Sir Batty was not to be daunted so or daffed aside by menace.

"Damn your word," he cried. "The coward who will kidnap a woman will be cur enough to misuse her. Dare you let me behold her and carry back to those that love her assurance of her state?"

Hercules looked steadfastly at Sir Batty for the space of several well-measured seconds. He respected courage in Sir Batty. He respected courage in anybody.

"You shall see her," he said gravely. "Follow me."

He rose as he spoke and led the way from the room into the corridor which communicated with the stairway in the wall by which Sir Batty had ascended. He traversed this corridor to a great door at the further end, struck a heavy stroke against it with his closed fist and, after motioning to Sir Batty to remain where he was, opened the door and passed beyond it, closing it behind him. Sir Batty, glancing around him and quickly taking stock of his surroundings, noted that the room Flood had just entered was at no great distance from the stairway in the wall and that there was no sign of guard or watchman. He had observed no more when the door he faced again

opened, this time wider than before, and Hercules, standing in the aperture, beckoned to him.

"Mistress Constant will receive you," he said, and drew aside to let Sir Batty, eagerly advancing, enter.

Sir Batty found himself in a large room, nobly appointed; so far a worthy dwelling for Clarenda Constant, who faced him with shining eyes and smiling lips.

"Sir Batty," she cried. "Dear Sir Batty," and stretched out her hands in a rapture of welcome. Sir Batty dropped on one knee and kissed her fingers, while Hercules listened, with an unmoved face, to a greeting to gain which for himself would have given him his heart's desire.

"This friend of yours," he said with a faint smile, "is so anxious to be sure that we have not treated you ill, that I have permitted him to see you and judge for himself."

"Dear Sir Batty," cried Clarenda again—and she put into her voice a warmth that made Sir Batty's bosom glow and that made Hercules feel as angry as he looked good-humoured—"Dear Sir Batty, how wise of you to find me out and how good of you to come. They have not beaten me, and they have not starved me, and they have not put me in chains. I can set so much to their credit." She spoke with a deliberate impersonality, as if she were the captive of some general gang of robbers, no one of whom was more important than the others, and Hercules felt that he ought to laugh at her nonsense yet somehow failed to smile. "But it is pitiful to be in the hands of such creatures, and I hope that you have come to take me away."

Hercules shrugged his shoulders and strolled to the great window, turning his back to the talkers and staring out over the great waves of the moor. It galled him queerly to observe how well that man and woman seemed to understand each other, breathe the same air, make the same vain gestures, use the same vain speech. Well, let them say their say and be blessed to them. The one certain thing was that Sir Batty had not come to take Clarenda away.

But for all Master Flood's surety, Sir Batty was not so sure of this. The passionate sound of Clarenda's welcoming voice, the passionate power of Clarenda's loveliness, the passion in her appeal for freedom, in her belief that

he had come to set her free, stirred him out of his habitual craft, his habitual caution, his habitual self-control. He cast a glance at Hercules, now standing out of earshot by the window and whistling softly to himself, and then his ardent gaze travelled back to Clarenda's beautiful flushed face. Sir Batty addressed her in a low voice.

"Do you really wish to be free?"

He asked this question almost unconsciously, for the thought had come to him, against the grain, that perhaps after all, Clarenda was, in some fantastical measure, an accomplice in this rape. The girl's eyes answered him before her lips.

"Yes, yes, yes," she cried, pressing her clenched hands upon her breast with such vehement assurance of truth as sufficed to overheat Sir Batty's cool reason. After all, at the heart, Sir Batty was an amorist, to whom the momentary tongue of the flesh is as the trumpet of the eternal angel.

Clarenda, watching him, honestly expecting that he was about to proclaim her delivery to freedom, thinking vaguely that he came to her and to Mountdragon with an army at his back, now saw his whole person stiffen with swift resolution. His left hand, which was at the present his best friend, shifted to his dagger-handle and loosed the weapon from its house. His feet that were so skilled in dancing skipped noiselessly across the floor towards the window, where Hercules still stood insouciant, his broad back an admirable target for any assassin with the necessary knowledge of anatomy. Desperately, for an insane instant, she held her breath as if she were the fascinated beholder of some play that she must needs see out to the finish before she dare applaud or condemn. More desperately, as she saw Sir Batty pause and swing his deadly left hand to Heaven, did she force herself to find a conclusion between her hope and fear, her hate and love, her sense of injury and her sense of honour.

"Hercules," she shrieked at the shrillest pitch of her voice. "Hercules!" The name had come glibly enough to her lips in the old days of fooling in the orchard. It came glibly now when her conscience called a warning.

Hercules swung round from his station at the window

with a look of satisfaction upon his countenance that was sufficiently surprising to read on the face of a man threatened with sudden death. Before he turned he slipped something into the bosom of his jerkin. When he turned, his left arm shot out and its hand caught Sir Batty by the throat, while his right hand closed round Sir Batty's left wrist and wrenched it unpleasantly. In the same moment of time Sir Batty was plucked from the floor and held aloft in the air, while his dagger fell from his twisted fingers. Almost as easily as a man might toss a handkerchief Hercules tossed from him the pendant person of Sir Batty who collapsed dismally on the floor many yards away. Hercules stooped and picked up the dagger and stuck it in his girdle. Then he turned to Clenda, who was now a green-white with sick horror, and made her a low bow.

"I thank you, lady," he said, in as quiet a voice as if nothing out of the common had happened in the tragic room. Then he glanced, with a smile, to the spot where Sir Batty, stifling groans and curses, was scrambling to his feet. Hercules made no suggestion of attempt to defend himself against renewal of attack. He just rested his fists on his hips and smiled commiseratingly.

"You are more of the assassin than the ambassador, Sir Batty," he said quietly. "You have broken truce, and you know the fate of truce-breakers. I shall have to hang you, Sir Batty."

He plucked, as he spoke, from his jerkin the sea-man's whistle which he carried on a cord about his neck, and lifted it to his lips. There was no doubting the sincerity of his speech or of his purpose. Sir Batty laid his left hand for a moment upon the hilt of his sword and then removed it again. Hercules was warned; Hercules was armed; he knew already that Hercules was the better blade. Moreover Hercules' pipe would fill the room with his followers well-nigh before Sir Batty could get his weapon free. With a sullen frown he waited for Hercules to whistle.

But Clenda did not wait. Before Hercules had time to bring the mouthpiece to his lips, Clenda flung herself at his feet and lifted her clasped hands to him in passionate entreaty.

"For God's sake forgive him," she cried. "For God's sake let him go. If he did a wicked thing he did it for my sake, because he could not bear to see me a prisoner and miserable. For God's sake——"

Her voice wavered away into silence as she stared up into the grave face that could be so determined and so relentless. Hercules stooped and lifted her to her feet as easily as he would have picked up a kitten.

"You are my sovereign lady," he said gently, "and it is my pleasure to be able to obey you." He looked again towards Sir Batty. "I did not think that I should live to let a man go free who had thus broken faith with me, but the world is still a schoolroom and affords ever new lessons. Go in peace, but if you are wise keep away from Mountdragon."

Sir Batty experienced a quickening of the spirits that for a brace of minutes had gone very chill.

"You talk big of broken faith," he said bitterly, "but I ask you candidly is a gentleman bound to keep faith with a bandit like you?"

"I am more willing to admit myself a bandit," Hercules answered affably, "than to accept you a gentleman. A pledge is a pledge to whomsoever it may be delivered. Let that pass. Pray tell me, Sir Batty, before we part, what gain you hoped to garner from killing me?"

"You know well enough," Sir Batty answered, with regained composure. "The liberation of this unhappy lady."

Hercules nodded sagaciously.

"I understand. I skewered into silence. The road free by the stairway to the empty court and the open door. A shout to your friends yonder who have been slowly drawing near. They dash across the drawbridge and the rescue is won. Was not this your plan, Sir Batty?"

Sir Batty answered nothing though Hercules afforded him some seconds of breathing-time. Then Hercules spoke again.

"You forget," he said pleasantly, "that I have been in a scuffle or two in my time and have unlearned a world of folly. You might not have killed me, in the first place, and in the second you would have learned to your cost, and the cost of your company, that the castle was not so sleepy

as it seemed. I wish you good-day. You can find your way to the courtyard and no one will hinder your departure."

Sir Batty turned towards Clarendra, who was standing motionless as if she neither saw nor heard aught of what was passing. "Dearest lady——" he began, but he got no further, for Hercules interrupted him, striding between the man and the woman.

"No more words," he commanded, "or though I give you your life I deprive you of liberty. Be advised. Skip."

Sir Batty, realising his powerlessness, accepted his dismissal and left the room. He made his way to the courtyard and found it as empty as his hand. Through the open doorway he could see his friends hard by the mouth of the bridge. If any wild thoughts came into his mind they were dispelled by a touch upon his shoulder. He turned to find himself face to face with Griffith, who jerked a backward thumb in the direction of a crowd of well-armed seamen who had emerged from he knew not where, numerous enough and sturdy enough to have made short work of Sir Batty and his escort.

Griffith, without speaking a word, gave Sir Batty a little push in the direction of the drawbridge, and Sir Batty, also in silence, obeyed the impelling force. He crossed the drawbridge swiftly, joined his surprised friends and, without vouchsafing any immediate answer to the queries on their countenances, flung himself on his horse and led the company on the homeward road at a brisk trot.

After riding a little way Sir Batty slackened rein and in a low voice told Winwood and Willoughby, who were riding on his right and left, what had happened during his visit to the castle, and of how sadly he had been disappointed in his hope of disposing of Hercules and liberating Mistress Constant. Spencer Winwood commiserated him on the miscarriage of his plan, but Willoughby, who had listened to the narrative with a puzzled frown on his face, did not play echo to Winwood.

"Was it not an act of treachery," he questioned, "to strike at Master Flood when he was off his guard and you had gained access to him under cover of a truce?"

Sir Batty smiled contemptuously at the speech of his over-scrupulous companion.

"Know, honest Jack," he answered, "that the rules and laws of honourable warfare are not to be applied to bandits, outlaws, mutineers, and such the like villainry. Have you never heard how Messer Cæsar Borgia, that past master of strategy, trapped the Free Companions?"

Willoughby shook his head and murmured something rather inarticulate to the effect that a promise was a promise. Winwood shrugged his shoulders and Sir Batty answered with a condescending disdain.

"Do not mutter folly in your beard, honest Jack," he commanded. "You may be sure that my actions are always commendable and such as you may follow without searching of heart."

Jack Willoughby's face was a study in doubt, but Sir Batty paid no further heed to him.

"Shall we lend our horses wings?" he asked, with assumed gaiety, "we have news to carry to Lady Gylford, though it be far from good news. Come, friends, shall we make a race of it to the edge of the moorland? I will wager five gold pieces that I prove the first."

"Done," cried Winwood. Willoughby said nothing. Sir Batty spurred his horse and was off at top speed, but Willoughby came to a halt and made pretence to be busy with his saddle-gear. As the three servants rode by he signalled to his own man, who drew bridle, and his master bade him ride direct to Willoughby Homing. The man nodded and renewed his ride in a fresh direction. Master Willoughby, sitting still, looked after the others pursuing their vehement flight and likely soon to be out of sight. With the same puzzled expression on his simple countenance Willoughby turned his horse's head and urged the animal rapidly back upon the road by which it had just come.

CHAPTER XXXVI

AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND

WHEN Sir Batty disappeared, Hercules turned to Clarendra, who stood as still as the pillar that was once the wife of Lot, and paid her a reverence.

"I owe much thanks to your graciousness," he said, "for giving me that warning just now."

Clarendra shook herself free of her torpor with an effort and faced him, her pale cheeks flaming anew.

"You owe me thanks and more than thanks," she protested. "But for me you would be a dead man at this present."

"I owe you thanks and more than thanks," Hercules agreed cordially, "and I think I have paid you more than thanks by letting that gallows-bird go free to do more dirty business in a world which would well be clean quit of him. But my gratitude does not go so far as to admit that I should be dead at this present if you had not cried your cry."

Clarendra was in an hysterical mood, and Master Flood, honest intelligent gentleman, did not wonder at it. She raged at him.

"A stroke at the heart from a sure, strong hand is as deadly from the back as from the front if the hand know where to give point."

Hercules favoured the girl with one of those humouring smiles which, though he did not intend as much, had the power of driving her well-nigh to desperation.

"When I receive gentlefolk of Sir Batty's gentility," he said lightly, "I am wary enough to take no unnecessary odds. Your courtier has a code of morals that differs from your simple seaman's. So I was not to be taken by surprise."

As he spoke he slipped his left hand into the bosom of his doublet and bringing it out again displayed to Clarendra on

the extended palm a small flat circle of highly polished steel.

"I could see the room," he explained, "and its visitor and all that he did in this little plane of metal. I was more than ready for him when he made his move, but I was none the less grateful to you for your warning, for it showed that you liked me well enough to save me from subtle knifing. And he should be grateful to you, no less, for I fear if you had not spoken I should have been too severely tempted to hang him to resist the temptation, or to yield to your eloquent pleading."

Clarenda clenched her hands and stamped a foot in wrath.

"Would to God," she cried, "that I could have you at an advantage. So should you learn of my liking for you."

"You had me at an advantage just now," Hercules suggested simply, "and you let the chance go by."

"I would not see a pig killed so meanly," Clarenda protested hotly, "so you need not believe that I like you any better than a pig."

Hercules looked at her with a musing expression upon his face, and stroked his russet beard thoughtfully.

"I do not take your comparison too vilely," he assured her. "There was a saint once in Egypt long ago, who was mightily attached to a pig. Your porker is a useful creature, take him in all regards. Now if you had said an ass. Yet again, as I recall, there are very honourable and sacred associations with an ass. So to make an end of it, I thank you again very heartily for doing your best to save my life, and now with your permission I will take my leave, for, as I guess, there is a busy time before me."

Therewith he left her to her thoughts that he might devote himself to his own.

Hercules knew very well that there was a busy time before him, and he could not forecast the precise form that the business would take. It was quite possible that Sir Batty and his friends would try to rouse the countryside against him, that they might appeal to authority at Plymouth, that they might attempt to take Moundragon by storm. In such a case Hercules believed, with good reason for his belief, that there were many men in Devon who would stand by him and rally to his standard, holding that what Hercules Flood might do was liker to be right than

wrong. It was no part of Hercules' wish to kindle civil war in the West Country, but neither was it in his mind to surrender his stronghold. Wherefore he now sought out Griffith, and bade him be watchful in guard and brisk in all things for the defence of the palace. He gave no explanation of his orders and Griffith asked for no explanation of them. It was enough for the one to speak and the other to execute. He knew very well that Hercules was holding a fair maid a prisoner against her will. But he knew also that Hercules was treating his captive both kindly and honourably and he was very sure that the fair maid must be a foolish vestal not to rejoice in the favour of Hercules Flood.

But if the mind of Griffith reasoned thus simply that of Hercules had a harder task to tackle. For all he was so habitually self-confident and self-contained he was beginning to find himself immersed in perplexities unforeseen and teasing. Unforeseen, because he had honestly believed that Clarendon cared for him in her heart and would consent, after a little demurring, to his rough wooing. Teasing, because they began to imply grave consequences, not merely for himself—that was his own affair—but for others. This was not to be helped, yet in a measure it vexed him, and as his meditations drifting from grey to brown threatened to merge in midnight, he was relieved when they were at least temporarily dispersed by the irruption of Griffith with an announcement.

"One of those rider-men has returned, and stays by the edge of the Head, waving his kerchief and calling for speech with Master Hercules Flood."

Hercules forced his spirit to the surface of the sea of heavy thoughts in which it had been submerged.

"Which of the gentlemen is it? Surely it is not Sir Batty again?"

"Very surely it is not Sir Batty, neither is it his finicking London friend. It is the apple-faced addlepat that has a dwelling out by Tavistock way."

Hercules looked surprise.

"Master Willoughby of Willoughby Homing?"

Griffith nodded.

"This may be some snare. Does he ride alone?"

Griffith nodded assent.

"Then let him enter, in God's name," said Hercules, with a weariness that Griffith grieved to note. "Mount-dragon has an open mouth for visitors to-day."

A few minutes later Master Willoughby entered the room. He was flushed with embarrassment and his shyness tempted him to a clasping of hands and a twiddling of thumbs that did not heighten the grace of his carriage. But he had come to speak and he spoke. Hercules had scarcely risen to greet him when he began tumbling his words into sentences as best he could and leaving his sentences to shift for themselves in the matters of directness and ending.

"I am a plain country fellow, Master Flood," he began, "and though I will not deny that I have seen no little of London and can boast some acquaintance with the Court and its great folk, I find that I still remain a plain country fellow who has but one word for one thing and but one face for Sundays and week-days alike. I will not give you butter when you ask for cheese, and when you go about to beg me to stab you in the back, why, God help me, I can do no other than give you a loud 'no' and be damned to you."

Here Master Willoughby, pausing, wiped a hot forehead with the back of a hot hand and looked somewhat wistfully at Hercules.

Hercules looked at the embarrassed gentleman with a friendly smile.

"Albeit the manner of your speech is a little confused," he said, "it appears to me that the matter is of a friendly savour."

"You are right there, if you were never right in your life before," Willoughby agreed heartily. "I may be a bit thick in the head, but I thank Heaven it is too thick to let some thoughts in, and again that it is too thick to let some thoughts out. And among the thoughts that cannot come in is the thought that it is right to act as a very good friend of mine acted to-day, and among the thoughts that cannot come out is the thought that you are an honest fellow and that there must be some honest reason for what you have done, however strange it may seem."

Hercules felt an uplifting of the heart as he heard this protestation of friendly feeling from Jack Willoughby. It was expressed uncouthly enough, but there could be no question as to its significance or its sincerity. He extended his hand to grasp Willoughby's.

"I take it very kindly," he declared, "that you should come here and say this. It is my habit to weigh and shape my conduct for myself, and if it stands my judgment I am never at pains to solicit the judgment of others. But I freely admit that I am pleased to have your good opinion."

"I will bear no part against you in this business, I promise you," Willoughby said stoutly. "I would even join with you but that I do not love changing sides. There is a friend of yours, however, that is not of my mind."

"Philemon Minster?" Hercules queried. Willoughby nodded. "You must not blame Philemon Minster. He does not understand."

"He does not understand," returned Willoughby, "and I do not understand, which is why I do no more than stand by and see fair play. But your friend Master Minster is less nice. He is riding to London to acquaint my lord Godalming with this muss."

This was news to Hercules, but he showed no sign of surprise.

"Philemon is a chivalrous creature," he said kindly.

Jack Willoughby grunted.

"Plague take such chivalry," he said, "which leads a man to turn his coat and change his colours. But when you bring a woman into a business there is no saying what may happen."

Hercules smiled agreement with this profound philosophy.

"It is even as you say," he admitted. "Love of woman is a music that makes men cut strange capers."

"I wish you a good end to your dancing," said Willoughby soberly, "but my mind misgives me that you are in something of a pickle."

"That same thought has indeed presented itself to me," Hercules concurred.

"You have broken law, there is no use denying it," Willoughby pursued, "and if you seek to hold this place against

the Queen's justice you will break more law. It is not my place to advise you, for you seem to be one that makes and takes his own advice. But there is a plain question which I should like to ask you with no offence in it." He paused for a moment, and then, reading permission in Hercules' face, he continued: "Is this lass worth the trouble?"

"Quite," Hercules answered, with a cheerful bluntness there was no gainsaying.

"Then there is no more to say save to wish you well with a fair end to your enterprise."

As he spoke, Willoughby exchanged another hearty hand-clasp with Hercules, and bidding him farewell, quitted the castle.

While Willoughby was riding soberly to Willoughby Homing, turning over in his somewhat sluggish mind the form of words in which he should announce to his guests that he would take no further active part in their enterprise, the master of Mountdragon plunged anew into reflection.

To Hercules, chewing the cud of the sharp herb consideration, it was abundantly clear that there was no chance to hold out indefinitely at Mountdragon. In the end, sooner or later, the struggle would come to be one between the forces of the State and a mutinous subject and the mutinous subject could not hope to win the game. His opponents would not batter down the castle because of the woman it held prisoner—it galled him to think that he must owe so much protection to the presence of a petticoat—but they had other means of reducing him to subjection.

Mountdragon was well victualled, it was true, but the supplies his foresight had provided, though they well overlapped the period his confidence had prescribed for the lady's surrender, were far from inexhaustible, and whatever he and his fellows were willing to endure he could not consent to reduce Clarendia to the straits of starvation. After tossing his thoughts this way and that way, as a juggler tosses spheres, he finally held a handful of abandoned balls in the one hand of his fancy and the ball of decision in the other. He knew what was the best thing for him to do if he resolved, as he did resolve, to persist in his adventure.

His enemies would be too much for him on land, but there still remained to him the sea. The sea that had ever been his kindly foster-mother, the sea that he had loved and used so long, should be his friend again. He would convey Clarendo, willy-nilly, to his ship and bear her away. There were distant waters where a man might wear out a century in safety from discovery; there were islands where a man might reign a king; there were cities where a man might rule unquestioned; there were fat lands which a man could command. He knew himself for such a man and he meant that Clarendo should know him for such a man. He told himself that she should ever be as respected and honoured as she had been since the first day of her captivity, but his hope told him that when he had made himself a kingdom Clarendo would consent to be its queen.

Swiftly he considered ways and means. *The Golden Hart*, with half a crew aboard, rode at anchor in the bay. He would send Griffith at once to prepare her for sea and sail her to a near point upon the coast to which he would convey Clarendo. Then it would be hey for the Spanish Main and the far edges of the earth, and when his enemies mustered before Mountdragon they would find an empty cage.

He estimated that it would take Philemon—good rider though he was and sure to be well mounted—at least the full of a week before he could reach London. If my lord of Godalming resolved to set out at once for the West Country and if a man of his years could journey as swiftly as Philemon, which though possible was not probable, that still meant another week before he and his retinue could appear before Mountdragon. And by that time—Hercules hugged himself in the thought—he would be sailing with his lady far over the rim of the horizon.

It was not likely that those of his opponents who remained at Plymouth would guess at so desperate a purpose, or indeed, even if they knew of it, that they could effectively bar his way. He could command the friendship, active or passive, of half the town. He knew that there was not a seaman who ever shifted ale or lifted strong waters at the "Dolphin" who would raise a hand to interfere with him. But he was reasonably confident that his adversaries

would not anticipate his plan. They would wait in such patience as they could command for the coming of my lord of Godalming and the authority of the law.

The more Hercules mused upon his plan the more he liked it, unaware that he was pitted in strife less with men than with destiny. An unconscious Sisera, he did not guess that the stars in their courses were fighting against him, that things had happened which he could not foresee, which were to prove too strong for the pride of his enterprise. The man who believes himself master of a fortnight's breathing-time may well believe that he commands unquestioned the leisure of a few hours in which to carry out a simple scheme. But Hercules had not this leisure. The fortnight of his dreams was no better than a heap of dust at the heel of Time.

CHAPTER XXXVII

PHILEMON MEETS OLD ACQUAINTANCE

PHILEMON galloped madly along the high road with a whirling head and a throbbing heart. If he had no other cause for his headlong pace his uneasy conscience would have furnished him with a spur to speed. Persistently he asked himself if he had done right to act against his old friend and to ally himself with his enemies. Persistently he assured himself that he had done very right, that there was no other course open to a man of chivalrous spirit and delicate honour. A woman had been kidnapped, a woman had been prisoned. It was the duty of any true gentleman to attempt to set that woman free. Philemon further assured himself that the strength of his resolution owed nothing to the fact of Clarendon's beauty or to such feelings as he unadmittedly cherished towards her. No. Here was a damsel in distress, and if she were as unlovely as a hag or as unknown to him as some Aztec Queen it was imperative that a gallant knight should seek to accomplish her rescue at whatever sacrifice of friendship. Thus Philemon argued, his wits heady with wine and motion as he rivalled the wind on his way to the London that seemed so far away.

The splendid summer evening was beginning to shed a little of its splendour in preparation for the pensiveness of twilight when Philemon Minster came within view of Exeter town. His horse was tired and his horse's rider was tired, but whenever Philemon had watered his horse on the road he had at the same time sluiced his own body with goodly draughts of wine, which lent their feverish strength to his frail body and gave a fresh fervour to his unsteady brain. At Exeter he decided that it would be well to bait and sleep. Though he knew that he could, if he chose, find a fresh mount in the town, he knew also that

he could not ride without resting for the whole of his journey, and that he would therefore better serve the lady of his dreams by giving a little time to food and repose than by breaking down altogether in the attempt to accomplish the impossible. Wherefore he allowed himself a certain gratification of spirit as he beheld the ancient city piled upon its hill above the river, saw Rougemont hump its shoulder against the sky, and noted, with the appreciative eye of the craftsman, the commendable outline of the Cathedral.

Philemon was so in essence a sensualist that while he tasted the delight of his own devotion in thus riding romantically to London for the sake of a distressed lady as much as if he had read a like tale in a book of fables, he was no less keenly alive to the pleasures that his necessary halt must afford him. He pictured in his mind the conciliatory inn, the comfortable room, the clean napery, the pleasant meal of meat and wine, and the good bed in which a tired dreamer might dream new dreams. Though, therefore, both he and his steed were weary, he revived the flagging energies of the one with his whip, of the other with anticipation, and clattered through the open gate of Exeter in a fine style of horsemanship. He knew Exeter of old, as indeed he knew every corner of the West Country, and he knew exactly the inn he was making for and he rehearsed with precision the welcome he would receive at the "Bird in the Hand." He lessened his speed to a sober trot as he made his way along the narrow High Street, more crowded than he had ever known it, owing, as he assumed, to the kindness of the summer evening. He was heavy with his travel and the incidental potations, and less brisk than his wont to take notice of a brave display of flags and banners and gaudy bunting which hung on lines across the narrow street and depended from windows.

He was indeed so drowsy that he was almost nodding over the neck of his horse when a stumble of the animal over an unfortunate cobble jerked him into a measure of alertness. Looking about him as a man does that is abruptly shaken out of a doze, he was aware of a tavern hard by at his left and of an open window and of two fellows sitting therein and drinking together whose faces seemed

unaccountably familiar to him. Philemon had a few acquaintances in Exeter, but these twain were not of them, and yet Philemon knew that he had seen them before and could not give a locality to the seeing. Almost unconsciously he brought his mount to a halt the better to survey those two perplexing visages, the owners whereof, attracted by his patent curiosity, made ready to return him stare for stare. But almost in the instant their countenances, which were inclined to the challenge of aggression, were suddenly wreathed in smiles; the pair rose to their feet, gripping their goblets in their fists, and leaning out of the window into the busy street, they raised their cups in the direction of Philemon and, after obviously wishing him good health, they proceeded to drain a draught in his honour.

In a flash recognition and recollection came to Philemon. He walked again with Hercules through the woods towards the land-ship; he paused on the edge of the hollow where two foreign gentlemen that followed the arts were tweaking one another by the beard and pummelling one another with unsophisticated fingers. In a sudden impulse of pleasure at the sight of their grinning faces, Philemon urged his horse close up to the window, to the no small discomfort of the immediate crowd, and saluted the unexpected. He could not recall the names of the pair, could not indeed recall if he had ever known their names, but he felt oddly pleased at being thus greeted on a course where he expected little greeting.

"God save you, my masters," he said pleasantly. "It is good to meet you again. But I thought that when last we met you were making for London town."

"We were indeed making for London town," the Frenchman replied, nipping into the conversation more briskly than his companion, "and we reached London town, and we love London town, and we are loath to leave London town, and yet I should be prepared, if I were debating for my degree at the Sorbonne, to maintain that we are still, in the truly logical sense, in London town."

Philemon stared blankly at the speaker. The fatigue of his journey had anew asserted itself over the momentary flicker of vitality caused by the sight of the two familiar faces in the tavern window.

"I do not follow you," he drawled weakly. "How can you make a reasonable claim to be in London town when you are face to face with me here in honest Exeter?"

The Italian shrugged his shoulders expressively, as if to imply that he, like Philemon, could make nothing of the foolish speech of his friend. But the Frenchman rose briskly to the bait.

"Marry thusly," he replied. "Is not London the capital city of England. Grant you me that?"

Philemon nodded. He had not the slightest idea of the dancing-master's drift and was already vaguely regretting his halt. The Frenchman nodded and chuckled.

"Tell me further," he said, "is not the Sovereign of all England pleased to dwell in her capital city?"

Again Philemon nodded, less perhaps from acquiescence than from lassitude.

"Why then," persisted the Frenchman, "I should make bold to maintain that if the Queen of England lives in her capital city this city must be her capital city and therefore that this city wherein we change speech is not Exeter but London."

Fatigue fell like a discarded mantle from the shoulders of Philemon, and his face flew alertness like a banner.

"Do you mean to say," he cried, in a voice so suddenly loud that it startled the pair whom he addressed, "that her Majesty is in Exeter at this present?"

"Very surely she is here," said the Italian before his colleague could reply, "and that is why the streets are brave with banners and the multitude swarm upon the pavement."

Astonishment and hope agitated the heart of Philemon so greatly that he could scarce sit straight in his saddle.

"Do you know," he asked hoarsely, "if by any chance my lord of Godalming accompanies the Queen?"

The Frenchman and the Italian agreed in laughing at the query. But this time the Frenchman resumed command of the conversation.

"How otherwise would we be here?" he queried, with that cheerful egotism that takes for granted a worldwide knowledge of one's own affairs. "Since we are, and I thank Heaven for it, in my lord's service and help to lighten his

age and dispel his cares, it is but natural that we go where my lord goes."

"Where is my lord?" Philemon asked, in a voice so thick with emotion that the Frenchman's eyebrows went up in surprise, and he marvelled at the wild light in Philemon's hitherto sleepy eyes.

"Why he lodges at the 'Bird in the Hand,'" he answered, and was preparing to say more when he found that if he did he would address himself to vacancy. For the moment Philemon had heard the name of the inn, which was indeed that in which he had proposed to pass the night, he jerked his spurs into his horse's sides and clattered off along the High Street at a pace that promised peril to the wayfarers unless they hurriedly made a lane for his impatience.

The Frenchman glanced at the Italian and made a comical gesture with his hands.

"Those English," he said with expressive significance.

"Mad," said the Italian laconically, and tapped his forehead.

Then the pair returned to their wine and forgot all about Philemon plunging along the High Street.

Now albeit to Philemon it seemed little less than a miracle that had brought my lord of Godalming so suddenly close to him, there was in cold fact nothing that was at all miraculous in the happening and very little that was surprising.

This is what had occurred. On the day when my lord Godalming received a letter from his kinswoman at King's Welcome, telling him of Clarendra's whimsy concerning the land-ship and her intimacy with Master Hercules Flood, it pleased the Queen to ask her counsellor, as she was wont to ask him most mornings, what tidings he had of his betrothed. On this occasion my lord replied with equal composure and frankness as he had replied before. The Queen grinned at him.

"This mawkin of yours," she said, "is going to cause trouble. If you were a sensible man, my lord, you would go and look after your fledgling."

"If that is your Majesty's opinion," said my lord, politely tranquil, "I am quite prepared to act upon it. Have I your Majesty's permission to quit the Court for a season and journey into Devon?"

Travel was one of the passions of Elizabeth's extravagant nature. She still, at her advanced age, loved to make progresses through this part and that part of her dominions, staying at great houses, where she proved an exacting guest, an exasperating guest. Now the name of Devon fired her with an itch to amble.

"By my father's beard!" she cried, "I have no mind to do without your company. We have been together too long to part in a hurry, when"—she paused a moment and then said, with an emphasis on the pronoun—"when you carry such a weight of years. Yet I think that baggage of yours needs looking after. Wherefore, to reconcile both our minds, I have it in my mind that we shall journey together into the West Country and cheer our loyal Devons."

When her Majesty took a fancy into her head my lord knew that there was no gainsaying her, even if he had wished to gainsay her. And so it came to pass that a select portion of the Court proceeded to journey at ease and leisure on the road to the West Country, with the Queen and Jock Holiday and my lord of Godalming at its head. The pompous company halted at stately mansion after stately mansion on the stages of its way, and enjoyed itself or did not enjoy itself according as its individual units inclined or disinclined to voyage. When the party reached Exeter her Majesty was the guest of the Bishop's Palace with most of her following. But it was an old custom in the West Country that when the lord of King's Welcome journeyed towards his own house by Plymouth, he, if he halted at Exeter, honoured the "Bird in the Hand" with his presence.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

NEWS FOR MY LORD

TO my lord of Godalming, sitting alone in his great chamber, in the "Bird in the Hand," came a messenger from the anteroom to say that one was without who had ridden in haste from Plymouth with urgent news for my lord. He had barbed the shaft of his business with the words that his errand concerned King's Welcome. My lord allowed the shadow of a frown to trouble the serenity of his countenance. Then he was serene again and bade admit the news-bringer.

Philemon Minster, haggard with fatigue, dashed with dust from hatband to spur-leather, his jerkin stained with his sweating, and his cheeks ruddled with the wind, limped into the room and saluted the famous Minister of State.

Philemon had too sensitive an imagination not to be keenly impressed by the presence in which he stood. Here was a man who for more than twice the length of Philemon's amiable, aimless, delicate existence had dealt with the intimate concerns of nations, shuffled the cards of policy with kings of the blood and princes of the Church, and helped very vigorously to decide the immediate destinies of the world. And into this august presence, this almost awesome presence, Philemon felt that he came blundering as a foolish bird or a foolish bee blunders into a room. He paused as the door closed behind him, conscious of the contrast between himself and his host. But he reminded himself that he had come on the service of Clarendon and that the great man whom he faced with throbbing pulses was also the affianced husband of the loveliest lady in the world.

"My lord," he said, recovering his courage with an effort, "Mistress Clarendon Constant, your plighted bride, has

been carried off by one Hercules Flood, that I had ever esteemed as an honest man, and he holds her a prisoner in his castle on the moor."

My lord of Godalming received this amazing information without the least disturbance of equanimity. Before he replied to it and before he gave any sign that he comprehended its importance, he slipped his fingers into the handle of his table-drawer and very precisely selected a packet of letters.

"Hercules Flood," he said evenly. "The name is very familiar to me and with good reason. I have brought with me"—and he held up the packet as he spoke for the contemplation of the astonished Philemon—"a number of reports from Captain Hercules Flood, written from time to time during the last ten years, and all of them of most admirable quality, sagacious, full of observation, instinct with honour, no less than with humour, conspicuous for clarity, precision and foresight. How does it come about that this Hercules Flood has become a purloiner of other men's brides?"

Philemon gaped at him, amazed at the tranquillity with which the renowned famous statesman accepted his tidings.

"Alas, my lord," he cried, "I cannot answer you. I would to Heaven I could. The man was my dear friend, my idol, fearless, blameless, magnificent. And yet he has done this wicked thing."

"How," questioned my lord pensively, "do you know that it is a wicked thing? How comes it that you have so suddenly revolted against your idol?"

Philemon's answer was to draw from the bosom of his jerkin the letter which Clenda had attached to the arrow and to tell Lord Godalming the tale of how he found it and of his interview with Hercules Flood and of what happened thereat. My lord listened attentively with no change of countenance or display of emotion. Once or twice indeed Philemon believed that sometimes the faintest shadow of a smile and sometimes the faintest shadow of a frown flickered over the ancient stately face, but he told himself afterwards that he could not be sure of this.

"What is your name, sir?" asked my lord when Philemon had delivered his story. Philemon gave his name, and

this time my lord's smile was patent and unrepressed; happily it was a smile of approval.

"Are you," he said, "the same Philemon Minster who is the accomplished author of a chap-book of verses entitled 'Swans of Parnassus'?"

In spite of himself Philemon could not help reddening with pleasure.

"I am indeed," he admitted, "but I marvel that your lordship should be cognisant of my indiscretions."

"I am interested," said my lord carefully, "in all that concerns the greatness of our State. I believe we Englishmen mean to be as famous in letters as in arms. So it pleases me, in spite of my years, to keep in touch with the poets, young sir, and I found no small measure of content in your 'Swans of Parnassus.'"

"Your lordship is very good to say so much," replied Philemon, whose anxiety was stronger than his vanity, "but I would wish to recall your attention to the grave case of Mistress Clarendon Constant—your plighted bride."

"You are very earnest in the cause of Mistress Clarendon Constant," said my lord. "It is good to see a young man so chivalrous, and I am glad to think that the world is not waxing old. May I ask if you have any acquaintance with the lady of whom we speak?"

Philemon's pale face coloured a lively crimson and he fidgeted nervously with the edge of his hat.

"It was my rare good fortune," he faltered, "once to behold the lady as she rode on the moor, but it has never been my felicity to have speech with her."

My lord of Godalming nodded gravely.

"I see," he said thoughtfully, "I see. I am grateful to you for recalling me to my duty. Will you be so good as to await me here while I go to acquaint the Queen of this matter. My servants shall bring you some refreshment which you must need after your journey."

Philemon, with a still flaming face, acknowledged the politeness of Lord Godalming with a bow. My lord summoned a servant; gave him instructions touching the welfare of Philemon and then quitted the chamber without the least sign of agitation on his countenance or in his carriage.

When my lord of Godalming reached the Bishop's Palace and, after some slight delay, gained the presence of his Sovereign he told her the tale that Philemon Minster had told him and he gave her Clarendon's missive to read.

The Queen listened, and the Queen read, and the Queen spoke. "By the beard of my father," she said, "here is a pretty kettle of fish."

My lord bowed gravely in agreement with her Majesty's opinion.

"I told you you were courting trouble when you suited this trollop of yours," said Elizabeth. "What is the matter with the men that they make such a bother over the wench? First you and then this freebooter, and Heaven knows who else beside."

It may be that the thought occurred to Lord Godalming that he could name one name that was in the Queen's mind. If it did it found no expression in his face.

"The minx is well enough to be sure," the Queen continued, "but I protest she is no Helen thus to be snatched away from you, my poor Lord Menelaus. And who is this new Paris that is playing you this scurvy trick? I seem to remember the fellow's wild name."

Lord Godalming repeated very much what he had already said to Philemon Minster concerning Hercules Flood, in the same manner of dispassionate commendation. The Queen nodded her head sagaciously.

"I mind me of the rascal now," she said, "though I never saw him but once, but I heard his strange name then and I have heard it since now and again on the lips of your lordship."

My lord bowed.

"He is a sturdy, independent fellow, that goes his own way and fights for his own hand," he said, "but he has often been of service to your Majesty."

The Queen seemed still to be busy in recollection.

"Yes," she said, "I remember him well. Sir Francis Drake brought him to me with a number of his men after our great victory. I recall him because he was the finest fellow of them all and I asked for his name and laughed when I heard it. I think, if I may say so, that he was not a little taken with our poor charms, for I remember that

he stared and stared as if he could not take his eyes from my face."

"A youth of so much sense and judgment as he has since proved himself to possess could scarcely fail to appreciate the beauty of Gloriana," said my lord sententially.

The Queen rewarded the old courtier with a little mincing smile.

"Well," she asked, "what do you propose to do, my lord, in this business?"

"With your Majesty's gracious permission," replied Lord Godalming, "I propose to go at once into Plymouth and take the matter in hand myself."

The Queen looked approval.

"Do so, do so," she said. "You shall act as our representative in this matter." She paused for a moment and then added with an air of pleased afterthought: "And honest Jock Holiday shall go with you to serve you with his common sense."

Lord Godalming made a deep inclination in sign of gratitude at this mark of favour.

"Your Majesty is too good to your poor servant," he assured her. "Have I your Majesty's permission to set forth at once?"

"Surely, surely," said the Queen. "The sooner the better. But before you go I wish you would tell me, my lord, why you take all this trouble so coolly. I thought your old blood would be on fire with indignation."

"My old blood," replied Lord Godalming, with a faint smile, "is as hot as ever to resent an affront, I can assure your Majesty. But there is something strange in this case and I cannot speak upon it with precision. From what I know indirectly of this Hercules Flood and from what I have learned from Master Philemon Minster, who adores him almost to idolisation, though he has gone against him in this matter, I am led to believe that his bearing towards Mistress Constant is absolutely honourable."

"Although he has made her a prisoner," commented the Queen with a sneer. "A lusty young man with a pretty lass for captive. Come, come, my lord, I think I find you somewhat too credulous."

"Nevertheless," persisted my lord, "with your Majesty's permission I must still keep to my opinion until I have reason to judge otherwise. And now, with your Majesty's good leave, I would be fain to depart that I may the sooner get to the heart of this mystery."

"Go, my Red Cross Champion," said the Queen with a grin, "go and rescue your Una from this felon knight. But remember to take Jock Holiday with you as your squire, for he is like to deliver me a more impartial report than I could count on from your lordship's passion for this girl."

My lord had taken the Queen's queer humours in good part for so large a portion of his life that he found, or showed, no difficulty in accepting them now, albeit they pricked so deeply at his own private interests.

"Have I your Majesty's authority," he asked quietly, "to deal with this foolish business as I deem best?"

"Aye, aye," the Queen answered, "do as you will, always remembering that there be the law and the Commons to consider. And when you have got this turbulent fellow—Flood, did you call him—in hand, see to it that I have a sight of him, for indeed I bear him a kindness for the way he adored me in Armada year."

My lord bowed acquiescence, took his leave and returned to the "Bird in the Hand," where he gave certain orders to his chamberlain. Then he found Philemon still plying the flagon, and notably none the better for it.

"Bestir, my young friend, bestir," chided my lord, "for it is very meet and peremptory that we should be at King's Welcome before this day be done."

To the wine-dizzy Philemon it seemed an impossibility that he could mount horse again for a ride of some thirty miles, or that my lord at his age could attempt so rash an experiment.

"I have read, my lord," he said with a vinous smile, "that Leonardo, the great Italian, maintained that one day flying may be permitted to men, but the time is not yet, and we cannot fly from Exeter to Plymouth."

My lord knitted his brows in a reproving frown.

"We must wait upon the dreamer's good pleasure for taking the way of the air, but we still, I thank Heaven,

hold command of the ground, and we shall get to Plymouth in good time. If we cannot have pinions we can have litters, and so we shall travel at ease and arrive at King's Welcome ready to take our share and play our part in whatever is doing."

Thereupon my lord and Philemon descended into the courtyard of the inn, where two litters awaited them attended by a company of gentlemen fully armed and all bearing torches. My lord introduced Philemon to one litter, entered the other himself, gave the signal for departure and the whole cavalcade, with clattering hoofs and flaming lights, passed out of Exeter on to the open road.

The journeying of the pair was very different, for whereas Master Philemon Minster was no sooner aboard his litter than he dropped into a heavy sleep and abided therein until the term of the journey, by reason of his hard riding and his busy day and the heady wine, my lord of Godalming, with the aid of an oil lamp that was swung from a socket, pleased and sustained himself with the refreshment of his familiar 'bedbook, namely the reflections of the illustrious Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. And so, the one in sleep, the other in study, the very different pair journeyed the length of miles that lay between the good city of Exeter and the good city of Plymouth. And Master Philemon Minster dreamed unhappy dreams, and my lord of Godalming nodded himself into a snatch of slumber over the Stoic, and the procession with its flare of torches snaked its way across the night, like some kind of grotesque terrestrial comet, steadily measuring and lessening the distance between the "Bird in the Hand" and King's Welcome.

My lord arrived at King's Welcome at an hour when my lady Gylford would, in the ordinary course, have been long abed. But the courier that my lord had despatched ahead had kept her up and agog, and had moreover gathered to her company the three gentlemen from Willoughby Homing. My lord listened with inscrutable gravity to what each of the four had to say, and then with great directness and precision dictated his plan of action for the following morning. It was plain that Master Flood had no knowledge of the Queen's progress or of the near pres-

ence of my lord, and would be taken very much by surprise by a visitation on the following morning and a summons to surrender in the Queen's name, which he must be assumed not madman enough to defy, however mad his late action might denote him. Thereafter my lord went composedly to bed and to sleep and my lady Gylford sought her couch and passed a troubled night, and the gentlemen drank and dozed where they sat. A comparatively insignificant member of the household had, however, his own ideas on the matter. This was honest Master Sandys, who prepared to pass the night in quite other fashion.

CHAPTER XXXIX

AN OVERLOOKER

ON the summit of Wishing Hill a man lay on his stomach among the dried grasses and gazed across the moorland in the direction of Mountdragon. Wishing Hill is little more than ten miles from Plymouth, but Mountdragon is more than five miles from Wishing Hill, so an ordinary observer would have gained little satisfaction from his survey. But this was not an ordinary observer. As he lay propped upon his elbows he held in his hands an object of his own manufacture the use of which seemed to afford him infinite satisfaction. It was a tube of card, about a foot in length and about an inch in diameter, and the man held it to his right eye and peered into it steadfastly. At a little distance behind him a jolly-faced lad was seated with his back against one of the thicket of trees that crowned the hill and watched him with eager curiosity. A little further removed, on the slope of the hill, a tethered mule browsed contentedly.

"It's wonderful," the man with the tube said in a low voice, lowering his instrument as he spoke and turning a beaming face upon his companion. "It is a pretty good march to Mountdragon, but I tell you I might as well be on the door-steps as here on Wishing Hill."

Master Sandys noted the desire in Jenkin's eyes and parted lips of wonder and his kindness replied to it.

Jenkin nodded eagerly and crawled to the side of the man, took the tube gingerly in his hand and applied it to his eye. After a few seconds he gave a gasp of delighted surprise.

"Lord, Master Sandys," he whispered, "'tis a marvel, I could almost count the bricks. It must be magic. Are you sure it is lawful?"

"There is no magic about the thing," replied Sandys a little severely as he repossessed himself of the tube. "A little knowledge, a little observation, a little common sense, are all the spells I employed to its creation. Master Thomas Digges and I have been in correspondence this great while touching this matter and I have been so favoured as to read a copy or exemplar of a treatise of his father, Master Leonard Digges, which is full of enlightenment. But I think I have bettered them. Father and son I think I have bettered them. I shall write a paper on it for the University of Leyden. I can tell you more of its construction another time, for just now we have other eels to skin."

Sandys had again turned his tube in the direction of Mountdragon and he lay for some time in observant silence. It was early morning. Sandys had been there before dawn; Jenkin and the mule Bucephalus had but newly joined him. Sandys kept silence now for a long time; it seemed ages to Jenkin, who had resumed his tree and sat staring at his supervisor and musing over his brief experience of what had seemed to him wizardry. At long last Sandys lifted a foot and shook it as if to attract the boy's attention. Then he spoke rapidly in the same hushed voice as before. It was notable that man and boy moved and spoke as if they shunned discovery.

"They are lowering the portcullis," Sandys said. He was silent again for a little; then he resumed. "A cart drives out with some women in it. It is drawn by two mules and is driven at a quick pace across the moor in the direction of Tor Bay."

Sandys turned on his elbow as if to follow or anticipate the course of the cart and uttered a little cry.

"I can spy a sail in Tor Bay," he said. "It seems to ride at anchor." He swept his glance back again to Mountdragon and continued his communication. "Men are riding out leading mules with loaded pack-saddles. They follow the direction of the cart and will soon overtake it. Here is a problem the solution of which should not be very difficult to the trained logician. Bestir, Jenkin, bestir; get you quick astride Bucephalus and prick at your best speed to King's Welcome. There seek my lord and tell him that the inhabitants of Mountdragon are quitting the castle and

making for Tor Bay where there is a ship waiting in the offing. My lord will understand what to do. Lose no time in this. Ah! there's a good lad!"

These last words were spoken commendingly as Sandys, turning his head, saw that his companion had already untethered Bucephalus and was seated in the saddle.

"God be with you, Master Sandys," Jenkin cried. Then he waved a hand, wheeled the mule round, jerked his heels into the animal's sides, and disappeared down the slope of the hill on a surefooted trot.

Master Sandys returned to his perspective-glass. He was so enchanted by the results of his experiment, results that seemed to him magnificently satisfactory, that he was in danger of forgetting the gravity of his business in the immediate and peculiar pleasure it afforded him. But his sense of duty briskly returned to him when, after the passage of a small company of horsemen over the drawbridge to follow the previous trail, these were followed by a man on a massive black horse who was leading by the bridle a white palfrey with a vast side-saddle that carried a woman.

"My deductions were accurate," Master Sandys murmured approvingly to his beard. "It is to be hoped that the folk at King's Welcome will have the sense to act upon them. Anyway I have done my best. O blessed, blessed instrument!"

Therewith he patted the magic tube very lovingly with his palm and again applying it to its purpose watched the cavalier and the lady proceed at an easy amble on the course of their predecessors. Behind them was the lowered drawbridge and the great gate of Mountdragon yawning like an open mouth.

Master Sandys peered with a sense of unexplainable fascination at the abandoned castle. There was, to his speculative mind, something pitiable in the thought of this stronghold that had lately shown so formidable, now lying open to any passing bird or prowling beast or pilfering vagabond. Some thought arising out of Master Sandys' moralising seemed suddenly to quicken him from passive observation to immediate action. Thrusting his precious perspective-glass into the bosom of his jacket he proceeded,

in a crawling motion, to descend the opposite side of Wish-ing Hill to that on which Bucephalus had disappeared. As if he believed or feared that those he had lately been watching possessed the powers that he possessed he acted as if he were at the greatest pains to keep out of sight of possible observers. It was by no means easy or agreeable to travel as Master Sandys was travelling, now crouching in a hunched-up attitude, now creeping on all fours, now running with his body a little more erect where good cover was afforded, but his native sturdiness and his daily activity served him well, so well indeed that in a little more than an hour's time he had come through patches of forest and spaces of moor and was standing breathless but exultant in front of the lowered drawbridge of Mountdragon.

He paused for a moment and looked about him. The fugitives from Mountdragon had disappeared from the range of his vision and he did not now seek to supplement it with the aid of his cherished instrument. Instead he rapidly crossed the abandoned drawbridge and passed, with a queer sense of adventure, into the deserted courtyard of the keep. He stood there for a moment alert, suspicious, observant, asking himself if he were really alone in the place. There was no sight, no sound to suggest the presence of any other human being. He called aloud and only the echoing walls answered him. He ran this way and that, scaling stairways and peering into empty rooms, and every step he took gave him further assurance of his solitude. There was something strange and fantastic in the place, so fairly arrayed, so bravely furnished, and yet so castaway and desolate.

But Master Sandys had no time to allow himself the luxury of philosophical reflections. He had come, upon a sudden inspiration, to effect a certain purpose. Swiftly he returned to the courtyard; swiftly he entered the little chamber at the side of the great gate which sheltered the windlass wherewith the portcullis was lowered and raised. Gripping the handle and making to exert all his strength he proceeded to turn it. To his surprise and satisfaction it worked more easily than he expected and in a few minutes the drawbridge was raised and Mountdragon again temporarily inviolable.

CHAPTER XL

IN THE TOILS

HERCULES moved through the clear bright morning with spirits that were well-nigh as blithe as the day. Although Clarendra rode by his side, sullen and silent, still she was riding by his side and she was to journey in his company upon the sea to the worlds beyond the sea. He told himself that she would surely love him yet; that the spark of love was still in her heart, though it was for the moment smothered under the ashes of her anger, and that it was in his power to blow upon that spark and quicken it into a living flame. His spirits rose, too, at the thought of going aboard his ship again and hearing the winds sing in the sails and pushing his way across the changing waters. He was well aware that his exploit had made England an impossible habitation for him, but he did not allow himself to regret this or do more than remember that there are other lands under fiercer suns where the strong arm and the long sword could carve themselves a goodly lordship.

Once or twice he addressed some words to Clarendra, but she made him no answer and he abandoned the attempt to engage her in talk. Her face was set in a bitter frown at this new denial of her sudden hope of liberty.

The pair had ridden some distance over the moorland, each busy with widely different meditations. Already the air was crisper with the saltness of the sea; already on the nearing water *The Golden Hart* swayed like a feather. Where the land began to slope towards the ocean they found themselves within a quarter of a mile of the mounted mariners. On the more distant beach a cart was drawn up and a ship's boat containing the women of the household of Mountdragon was being rowed quickly to the waiting ship.

Hercules gave a sigh of satisfaction as he beheld the pleasing scene, but his satisfaction was sharply interrupted by a little cry which broke involuntarily from Clenda's lips. He turned quickly to look at her face and then his glance, swiftly following her eager averted gaze, saw that which staggered him well-nigh to madness. Out of the near cover of a patch of woodland to the right more than a mile away a number of horsemen emerged and made in their direction at full speed. Hercules knew in a moment that these were in pursuit and he measured the distance between himself and the beach to see if by riding hard they might yet outstrip his enemies. He had almost decided that there was a chance when from the far end of the wood a further company of horsemen issued, who galloped along the cliff edge to cut him and his fellows off from the sea.

It was plain to Hercules that his game was spoiled. It was plain, too, to his followers, who had halted their horses and were looking round to him for command. Hercules had already gauged the number of his enemies and realised that his little force was outnumbered by more than four to one. All this took but a few seconds of time, but in those seconds Clenda had jumped from the great chair-like side-saddle and was running across the uneven ground in the direction of the advancing troop. Hercules swung his horse round after her. "Scatter, save yourselves," he shouted to his hesitating mariners, as he dashed after the fugitive. He hardly knew what he was doing or why he did it; only he felt a kind of desperate resolve to follow out to the last the course he had so far pursued. In another instant he had overtaken Clenda and, hardly pausing, he stooped from his saddle as he reached the girl and putting an arm round her waist swung her to the saddle in front of him as he turned his horse in his tracks. The screams of Clenda and the shouts of his pursuers mingled in an unmeaning din in his ears while he dashed at a headlong fury towards Mountdragon as the hunted wild beast speeds to the refuge of its den. Time passed unheeded in that wild ride. Clenda had shrieked herself into silence, and the cries of his pursuers sounded fainter and farther off as at last he urged his horse up the slope of Mount-

dragon, only to find the drawbridge raised and entrance to his own house denied him.

In a moment, as if such a catastrophe were no more than the manner of welcome he had expected, Hercules lowered the dazed Clarendia to the ground and leaped lightly from his saddle after her. Unseen in the far distance the pursuers were urging their hunt, but Hercules paid them no heed. Taking Clarendia, numb and unresisting, by the hand and guiding his horse by the bridle, he led the woman and the animal to a removed spot on the further slope of the Dragon's Head.

"I would not have you or my horse stand in any risk of harm," he said quietly—and Clarendia harkened to him dully as if hearing a voice in a dream—"but if either of you care to look on you may see some pretty fighting."

He slipped the horse's bridle into her hand and she retained control of it mechanically. She might well have believed that it would be hard to add to her astonishment, but such a wonder was reserved for her. For while she stared Hercules, whom she had always known as a man of leisurely motion, was suddenly transformed into a creature of fire-like activity. There was a small clump of trees at a little distance. Hercules ran to it with the speed of a boy. She saw him leap up to sturdy boughs, break them down with his weight, and wrench them with impetuous strength from their parent trunk.

Clarendia, dizzy and bewildered, watched him as he returned trailing great leafy branches in his hands and under his arms. These he dragged to the highest part of the Dragon's Head where the platform for the drawbridge stood and rapidly arranged them to form a kind of rough barricade in front of him. A glance at the nearing riders and a rapid calculation assured him that he had still some minutes for brisk business. He raced down the slope to a place where a pile of large stones stood, the leave of a quantity that had been used to better the condition of the causeway to the castle. Twice and thrice and yet a fourth time he came and went, each time bearing the burden of a huge lump as easily as if he had been lifting a football. These stones he arranged to stiffen his barrier of branches and keep it in position.

Clarenda marvelled to behold a man in such perilous straits acting in such a manner, so brisk and swift and nimble about his defence. Well-nigh in spite of herself her wonder found a voice.

"Why, in God's name," she cried, "do you wait here upon your death while you have still a horse and a chance to escape?"

Hercules looked at her with a blazing earnestness in his sea-coloured eyes.

"Will you come with me?" he asked, voicing an old question with a new vehemence.

Clarenda shook her head. The dogged obstinacy of the man bewildered her. Hercules pushed his final stone into its place.

"It is never my way," he said lightly, "to quit a game before the end. The winning or losing rests with Heaven, but I will lend Heaven a hand by making a fight for it."

Therewith he began to lop off with his dagger such small branches of his rough palisade as might interfere with his defence. Clarenda, through all the whirlwind of her rage and sense of shame, found she must needs admire him as he stood on the summit of the Dragon's Head awaiting the arrival of his enemies with as much composure as if he were at the crest of a regiment, instead of being a lonely hopeless man. The one advantage in his favour, the peculiar formation of the Dragon's Head, if it safeguarded him from an attack in the rear, could only mean the retarding for a very little while of the inevitable. Clarenda might tell herself she hated the man, but she could not deny that he had a gallant courage. She held her breath as she saw him shift his dagger into his left hand, and felt a sudden vague bewildering wish for his safety.

The horsemen came sweeping into view with my lord Godalming at their head, going as quick and easy as the youngest of his company. It was not until later that Clarenda found leisure to wonder at his sudden appearance. As the hunters reached the slope, some of them would have continued their charge to the top, but my lord called a halt in a ringing voice that commanded obedience. The company of cavaliers reined up in a crescent of menace

on the slope some yards distant from their quarry. Most of them were strangers to Clarendra but she saw familiar faces in the throng, Sir Batty's and Master Winwood's and Master Willoughby's, and Jock Holiday discreetly in the background. One young man with a pale face and eager eyes was staring at her intently. She did not know his name, but she knew that she had seen him before though she could not remember where or when. She thrilled with exultation at the sight of all those zealous gentlemen and at the thought that, thanks to them, she was at last surely free. And then involuntarily she glanced away from them to the lonely imperturbable figure at the top of the slope, whom—so she assured herself—she hated so bitterly.

My lord saluted Clarendra with a great wave of his beaver but he made for the moment no motion to approach her. Instead he faced upon Hercules and addressed him.

"Captain Flood," he commanded, "in the Queen's name I call upon you to yield yourself my prisoner."

"My lord," Hercules replied, with great politeness, "you do indeed call, and with a most commendable loudness, yet I have a hardness of hearing come suddenly upon me which prevents me from taking your meaning."

Sir Batty pulled a pistol from his holster and took aim at Hercules. "Have done with him for good and all," he muttered.

But before he could pull trigger Lord Godalming was beside him and had taken so stern a grip of his arm as to compel him to lower his weapon.

"You are to take orders from me," my lord said fiercely, "and my orders are that there must be no shooting. It is my wish that this man be taken alive."

Such a wish was easy to express but it was far from easy to execute. The position in which Hercules was placed made it impracticable, if not impossible, to effect his capture by charging upon him and riding him down. The attempt would have been too likely to end in some adventurous horseman plunging over into the ugly gap between the Dragon's Head and the Dragon's Hump. A hurried conference decided that an attempt must be made to attack Hercules on foot and for this purpose half a dozen gentlemen dismounted, Sir Batty and Master Win-

wood being of the number, and with drawn weapons advanced briskly along the Dragon's Head to the attack.

Clarenda, observing in a kind of anguish, saw that Hercules awaited the assault with as tranquil a carriage as if he were airing an innocent blade in a fencing-school. Thanks to his hurriedly improvised but ingeniously arranged barricade his position was one of considerable advantage. The final result indeed of the unequal combat could hardly be in doubt, but Hercules was determined to postpone that result for as long a time and by as stubborn a resistance as possible.

When the assailants reached the summit of the Dragon's Head they soon found that they were not able to take Hercules' position by immediate storm. From behind his leafy palisade the rapier of Hercules and the dagger, which he used like a short sword, encountered their blades with bewildering rapidity and precision. He seemed to anticipate every motion of his adversaries and to baffle the united attack with incomparable strength and skill. In what seemed no more than a moment Clarenda, watching wide-eyed in fascination, saw two of the attackers fall back wounded from the fray, while the sword of a third, twisted from his grasp, went hurtling through the air into the gap between the Head and the Hump. Temporarily foiled by the flame of Hercules' play the other three fell back a little until, at a word from my lord, they were reinforced by three others, when the attack was vehemently renewed.

Then suddenly something happened so unexpected as to arrest the attention of all those that took part that day in the squabble outside Mountdragon. There came a whirring sound and a creaking of chains, and the draw-bridge of the ancient keep began slowly to slip from its moorings and to reach out like an arm over the gap between the Dragon's Hump and the Dragon's Head. Clarenda heard and saw and wondered as the chained timber slowly descended. The antagonists of Hercules, both those that were actively pressing him, and those that ranged on horseback with my lord, heard and saw and wondered. Hercules, with his sword and dagger alert, heard and wondered, but could not spare a second for a glimpse over his shoulder

to see. The question to all was what would happen when the unseen agent had done his work and the drawbridge was lowered. Would, the followers of my lord asked themselves, the man they were tracking be afforded a further chance of refuge for a time within the sullen walls of Mountdragon? Hercules only asked himself who, in the devil's name, could be in Mountdragon at that moment, and why he busied himself with fiddling at the drawbridge. Clarendon almost found herself wishing that the worker of the drawbridge might prove a friend to her enemy.

Whoever the person was that was lowering the drawbridge, he was patently working in a desperate hurry, for the bridge descended jerkily, striking at space. For some strained moments it seemed to the spectators as if it would never link the Dragon's Hump with the Dragon's Head, but remain for ever poised in air. Then, with a violent thud, its bow struck the platform that waited to receive it, and on that instant a man dashed from forth the gateway who bore in his arms what seemed to be a mass of drapery. He raced along the bridge at headlong speed and as he raced the assailants, not knowing what the meaning of this new event might be, pressed hard upon Hercules and left him no moment of leisure in which to look behind him. Through all the tumult of the conflict Hercules fancied himself befriended, saw the chance of a dash into the castle and a lifting of the bridge before his adversaries could come in upon him. Those same adversaries had no hint of what was happening, but they realised the possibility of aid to their quarry and they drove hard to prevent it. Clarendon, watching with clasped hands, saw the newcomer dart across the bridge and had barely time to recognise Master Sandys before he, with a swift swirl of the drapery he carried, engulfed the head and body of Hercules and brought him helpless to the ground.

CHAPTER XLI

A COURT OF JUSTICE

HERCULES sat as a prisoner in that very room of state which he had allotted to Clarenda during the period when she was in his power. Nothing was changed in the room; everything was changed in his fortunes. A day earlier he had dreamed of the freedom of the wide seas, of the foundation in some rich and distant land of a dominion worthy the sovereignty of the woman he loved. And now his dreams were turned to grey dust. He had played a wild hazard in the confidence of winning, and while he was still in the top of that confidence he had lost the game.

Such confused thoughts as struggled in his mind, shaping themselves thus, were suddenly dissipated by the sound of the turning of a key. As he lifted his head the great door swung slowly open and Clarenda entered the room. While Hercules rose to his feet Clarenda bade the soldier on guard close it behind her and the man and woman were left alone.

"Have you taken over the command of Mountdragon?" Hercules questioned her with a drolling smile, as if little of moment had happened since their last parting.

Clarenda answered, white-faced and tight-lipped.

"By the courtesy of my lord of Godalming, who holds the place, I come and go as I please."

"I am glad that it has proved your pleasure to pay me a visit," Hercules said lightly. "Will you not be seated?"

Clarenda shook her head. Plainly she had come with something to say and was seeking her words. Hercules made a polite gesture intimating that he waited upon her will.

"Do you know," Clarenda asked, "why you are held prisoner in this room?"

"I assume," Hercules answered tranquilly, "that I am set here because it is the best room in the castle."

Clarenda laughed at him.

"You are confined here to meet my pleasure and to feed my revenge. This is the room in which you have held me prisoner for so many hideous days. Now you are its prisoner in your turn and can savour its charm at your leisure."

"It is a very agreeable room," Hercules observed, looking about him with an air of nonchalance, as if he had never before noted the apartment with any care, "and has, as I observe, a very salubrious outlook. It was generous of you, lady, to surrender its comforts to me."

"I surrendered it to you," Clarenda said coldly, "that it might fret you with its reminder of what you had sought to do and failed to do. You are caught in your own trap, and I thank God for the capture."

Hercules shrugged his shoulders.

"I have seen tables turned before now," he averred, "and am in no wise discomfited to find myself in such case. But I take what comes."

"You are indeed a philosopher," Clarenda said, with disdain.

Hercules only smiled.

"Yes," he said again, "I take what comes. I played for what seemed to me the greatest prize in the world. If I had won, as I thought I should win, I should have been happy. But it does not follow that because I did not win I am therefore unhappy. If you were a man, or another kind of maid, you would understand that there are some stakes so well worth the playing for that it is better to play and lose than not to play and look on."

"You are easily pleased," Clarenda sneered. "I am not so easy to please but I delight in this hour. You have shamed my maidenhood by your cruelty. Where is your manhood at this hour? You are beneath my feet, my tyrant. You are behind my bars, my gaoler. All that you were to me that made me hate you, I can now be to you."

Hercules shook his head.

"I grieve to gainsay so fair a lady, but you cannot make

me hate you. So long as I live and breathe I shall persist to love you."

Clarenda's face blazed.

"You have strange ways for a lover," she cried, "and I am glad to pay you out for them. Heaven has caught you in its net, as Heaven in the end catches all sinners, but I scarce believe that even Heaven can punish you enough."

"Since I have lost you," Hercules replied, "I have nothing left to lose that is worth a sigh. If you really desire further speech with me shall we talk of something else? Our quarrel is at an end. May we not let it be buried?"

Clarenda made as if to speak, but before she could utter a word her purpose was interrupted by the entrance of Sir Batty, who addressed himself instantly to Mistress Constant without taking any notice of the presence of the prisoner.

"Sweet Mistress Clarenda," he began, "it is the present intention of my lord Godalming to examine the felon in this place and at this hour. He bids me say that he would be glad if you could bring yourself to be present at the inquiry and to give your evidence against the villain."

"After I have endured so much," Clarenda answered, "it can cost me but a little pang to tell the tale of my sorrows."

"I applaud your courage," protested Sir Batty, with enthusiasm, "as all the world would applaud did it but know of the fortitude with which you have endured your wrongs."

He seemed to have it in his mind to dilate upon this theme but his eloquence was interrupted by the arrival of Lord Godalming, who entered the room accompanied by his secretaries and a number of the gentlemen of his retinue, among whom were included Spencer Winwood, Jack Willoughby, Philemon Minster and Jock Holiday. Hercules saluted my lord, who acknowledged the tribute with a grave inclination. Then my lord advanced to Clarenda and, after making her a profound bow, took her by the hand and leading her to a chair, begged her to be seated. He placed himself at the headship of the table, with his secretaries on either side of him, and the other gentlemen ranged themselves as they could about the room. Next my lord bade Hercules, who was still standing, to be seated.

Then, after a few whispered words with his immediate neighbours, he looked with sympathy at Clarendra and with sternness upon Hercules and began to speak.

"I am here," said my lord, with a very judicial air, "to make enquiry into this strange business, which touches so nearly not merely my own honour, but the observance of the Queen's peace, and the due decorum of the realm. As I am permitted to sit here as the representative of our Sovereign Lady, I must therefore ask you, Mistress Constant, to say what you have to say against this fellow in apprehension."

"My lord," Clarendra said, as she rose to her feet, "without a doubt you have heard the bare outline of this man's offence against me. I will give you the details as quickly as may be, for the tale is one that it irks me to tell. Master Flood and I became acquainted over the matter of a house. I had a mind to lease from him the land-ship he built himself and he agreed on condition that he might visit me there daily for the space of an hour. Anon Master Flood took it into his head that he loved me and would have me for his wife. When I refused his vain proposal he bore me by force to this his castle and vowed he would keep me here until I consented. I must admit that I was treated with all respect, but no one could ever tell what I suffered in my spirit at the shame and humiliation of this detention."

My lord nodded gravely as she finished speaking, and for a moment there was silence in the room. Then he spoke.

"And you never," he more affirmed than questioned, "gave Master Flood the least encouragement in his wooing, or reason to think that his offer might be acceptable to you?"

"Never, never," shrilled Clarendra, and then her glance was caught and held by the level gaze from Hercules' sea-coloured eyes, and for a moment she dwindled into silence. "If he mistook," she resumed, in a small voice, "what to us of the Court passes but for usual politeness, was that my fault?"

A murmur of approval arose from Sir Batty and Mr. Winwood, but my lord made no comment.

"Have you anything to ask Mistress Constant?" he demanded of Hercules. Hercules shook his head.

"All she has said is true," he answered quietly.

Clarenda stood with lowered eyes, and asked herself if she should mention the pastoral episode, when she and her town friends had made game of Hercules, but even as she debated my lord thanked her gravely and entreated her to seat herself. She sank into her chair and was silent.

After Clarenda had spoken the others in turn delivered themselves in characteristic fashion of such evidence as they had to offer. Mr. Winwood told the little he knew of the business with brevity and directness, relieved by a polite irony. Sir Batty, under cover of a simulated warmth, elaborated and emphasised every point against the prisoner that cunning could advance and rhetoric elaborate. Philemon Minster was almost in tears as he alternated plain statement of fact with pathetic protestations of his former love and admiration of Hercules.

When he had done my lord looked slowly round.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we have all the evidence that is necessary, and any more accounts would but be needless iteration. I will therefore——"

But here he was interrupted by Mr. Willoughby, who rose to his feet.

"If it please you, my lord," he said, with slowly reddening ears, as he realised that the whole roomful of people were looking at him enquiringly, "I have something to say that I think should be said. There was a matter of a joke we played off on Master Flood—Sir Batty Sellars, Mr. Winwood and I—and I hold that we did him a wrong."

He caught Sir Batty's eye as he spoke, dark with an expression of anger and menace, but giving him look for look, he proceeded to tell of the jesting trick that had been played upon Hercules, and he spoke of it with a manly regret. He told, too, of the duel that had followed it and of the triumph of Hercules therein. Finally he made bold to assert his belief that, in the face of all seeming, the prisoner was an honourable man and must, however strange the assumption seemed, have believed himself to be acting aright.

None of the witnesses had much to say and none of them took a long time in the saying it. All their stories agreed inevitably as to the main issue and it was plain to all

present that my lord of Godalming had, as far as the facts were concerned, no very complicated problem placed before him. He listened to the speakers with an immovable face. When they had made an end of their evidence he turned to Hercules and addressed him courteously.

"Captain Flood," he said, "you have heard the tale of this lady, and you have likewise heard the testimony of these gentlemen here present, which in all pertinence supports her statement. It remains for me to ask you—since I take it for granted that you will not deny the verity of the charge against you—certain essential questions. In the first place, why did you, who have an honourable record, and can boast yourself an Armada-man, bring shame upon yourself by the abduction of a pure and well-born maid? You did this thing not only against her will, but in the full knowledge of the fact that she was, of her own free consent, betrothed in marriage to another man. Further, why did you persistently deny the lady's repeated demands for freedom? Finally, why did you suffer your madness to carry you into disloyal defiance of the Queen's sovereign authority as represented by me that am her deputy here? If you honestly think that there is anything to be said for you and for the course of your conduct in this unhappy matter, you are now free to speak your mind."

Hercules rose; saluted my lord with a courtesy as punctilious as his own, and answered with a clear-voiced composure.

"I think there is much to be said for me and, with your lordship's good favour, I purpose to say it. But, though there is much to be said, it need take no great space of time in the saying. I am charged, and rightly charged, with having carried Mistress Constant against her will to this my castle of Mountdragon, and of harbouring her here, also against her will. For my defence, in the first place, I ask of you no more than to regard the lady. Who would not risk life, fortune, all things save honour, for the sake of so wonderful a woman?"

Here inevitably every man present, save only my lord, turned involuntarily to look at Clarendon as if they had never seen her before, while Clarendon, rose-red, surveyed the table-cloth as if it were the very map of destiny. Only

my lord continued his steadfast gaze upon the face of the menaced man. Hercules continued:

"I can only plead in extenuation of what you choose to call an offence, that in the high fire of my vanity I believed this rare maiden eyed me with favour. In all honesty I believed she was mine in all but the confessing and that, when it came to the test which my boldness inspired, she would admit as much."

Hercules paused a moment, as if to gather the loose thoughts of his argument. No one spoke. Sir Batty aired a sneer. Philemon sighed. Mr. Winwood stifled a yawn. Mr. Willoughby grunted. Jock Holiday sniffed. Clarendra still stared, with crimson cheeks, at the green cloth as if it were a stream and she Narcissa. My lord surveyed Hercules with the same meditative look.

"I do not," Hercules went on, "plead in extenuation of my case that Mistress Constant has, as she herself has told you, been treated during her enforced abiding within these walls with all civility and discretion. As I esteem myself to be a man of honour I protest that she would have been so treated had she remained within my custody until we both were old and grey."

Sir Batty whispered an innuendo into the ear of Mr. Winwood, who laughed a baby laugh behind lifted hand.

"The main of my defence," Hercules continued, "is to be summed in no more than four words, 'I loved the lady.' She seemed to me, and she seems to me, to be worth the world to a man like me, who understands her and is fit to be her mate."

The glow on Clarendra's cheeks deepened, but none could see her eyes to know if they showed anger. Sir Batty frowned the rage he might not voice. My lord remained unmoved.

"I am not such a fool," Hercules continued, "as to assert that because I chance to love a woman, that woman is bound to take me at my own value and to love me in return. But though the term of my friendship with this lady was brief I had, without immodesty, some cause to believe that the passion she inspired was well understood, was not resented, was indeed welcomed."

Sir Batty struck the table angrily with his fist.

"My lord," he cried, "are we to sit here and listen to this fellow's insolent love-talk in the presence of the lady he has wronged?"

"I have given Master Flood permission to speak in his own defence," Lord Godalming replied coldly. "It is for him to choose the manner of his defence, and it is for me to decide when and if he overpasses the limit of his right. You, Sir Batty, are free, if it so please you, to withdraw, but if you choose to remain I must ask you to keep silence. Mistress Constant, of course, can go or stay as she wills."

Sir Batty's frown darkened to a scowl, but he did not venture to speak and he kept his seat. Clarendo made no move. Hercules inclined his head in recognition of my lord's words and continued:

"Circumstances arose which forced me to put into words the passion I cherished, and to ask her for the hand which I believed would be given to me. I then learned, for the first time, that Mistress Constant was betrothed to your lordship. No doubt Mistress Constant took it for granted that I knew of this betrothal. But I had been long away from England; I had scanty acquaintance with Court news and I did not know that she was in any way bound to another man."

Clarendo lifted her head for a moment and made as if she wished to speak, but she seemed to change her mind and resumed her former attitude.

"If I had known of the betrothal," Hercules went on, "I should not have paid court to Mistress Constant, however unfitted to her youth the proposed alliance might have seemed to me. But I did not know of it, and the tidings took me unawares at a moment when I made bold to believe that she and I had exchanged our hearts."

Hercules paused for a moment as if he thought it possible that my lord might choose to speak, but my lord kept silence and Hercules went on:

"It did not then seem to me, and it does not now seem to me, that you, of whom I knew nothing but the greatness of your name and the greatness of your age, had the right to come between my prime and the youth of this maid. We were English man and English woman, comely and lusty, fit to carry on the English race. I heard of you too

late, my lord; I loved and hoped that I was loved. I believed that in bearing away the lady I was but bearing away one who was in her heart my own from a most unfit betrothal. Thereafter, though it seems that I erred in my judgment, I was bound to stand by it and I have stood by it, hoping and hoping, to this end. I have no more to say. I am too unlearned in the juggles of the law to know what right you have to deal thus summarily with me, but I recognise your might, and so an end."

There was a little silence as Hercules ceased to speak and resumed his seat. Then my lord rose and spoke in a cold set tone.

"You have put your case plainly and boldly; you have striven to defend what was not to be defended. You have courted the doom you deserve. If you challenge my right to judge you, be assured that I am prepared to answer to her Majesty for my action in this matter. You must have known what the punishment for such an act would be. This lady"—and he pointed to Clarendra—"has demanded your punishment at my hands. Is not this so, Mistress Constant?"

Clarendra raised her eyes heavily and looked at Hercules.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "it is quite right that he should be punished."

"And in any case," continued my lord, "the Queen's justice must proceed. Master Flood, your punishment will be death."

Clarendra rose to her feet with a little cry.

"My lord," she said hurriedly, "I do not ask for such a punishment as that. I do not ask that he should die."

Lord Godalming rose also.

"That is the judgment, mistress," he said weightily, and turning to Hercules, added: "I give you an hour in which to prepare for your fate. Come, mistress and sirs, let us leave this felon to his thoughts."

He took Clarendra's hand and led her to the door. They passed near to the condemned man as they went, but Clarendra's head was sunk upon her bosom, and Hercules could only see that the hue of her cheek that was wont to be so fair and fresh, was gone to a sickly pallor.

As the company passed out of the room, Philemon sought

and obtained from Lord Godalming permission to say farewell to his friend. He advanced towards Hercules and extended a hand which Hercules did not refuse.

"It was my doing that you were tried in this room," he said rapidly, in a low voice. "I urged its aptness, on my lord, as being the room in which Mistress Constant was imprisoned. I was forced by my conscience to thwart your plans but I would not peril your life. In a quarter of an hour I will be where you wot of with a swift horse."

Hercules said nothing, only regarding his friend with a curious smile, and Philemon, with a haggard face, again quitted the chamber.

Meanwhile Lord Godalming conducted Clarendra to an apartment which was indeed the same that Hercules had occupied after her arrival.

"Rest," he said, in that firm tone which Clarendra recognised as a command, "until it is time to travel to King's Welcome. The gentlemen from Willoughby Homing are riding thither at once to convey the good news of your safety to my lady Gylford."

Clarendra listened to him dully. My lord moved towards the door and then turned to her again.

"It will, I am sure, please you," he said, "to know that I have resolved to mete out no punishment to any of Master Flood's followers. They were simple seamen who did but do his bidding and are scarce to be blamed."

My lord quitted the room, but the door had not remained closed for many seconds before it opened cautiously again, and Sir Batty glided swiftly into the room.

"Exquisite lady," he said in a clear whisper, "I kiss your hand. I wish you joy. We have won the game. That rascal shall hang. Marry your old lord, and thereafter I shall have much to say to you that I hope may find favour."

Clarendra looked at him with weary eyes. He was excited beyond his wont and showed himself plainer than he knew.

"Please leave me," she murmured, and Sir Batty, who was not at all wishful to be found there by my lord, quitted the room and made haste to join his companions for King's Welcome.

After Sir Batty had departed Clarendon sat very still for a while in a great gravity of thought. Almost it seemed to her—though her thoughts came and went confusedly without enduring form or precision—that in the late convulsions of her life her nature had been changed and mended. As she sat and mused she seemed to see the world clearer, and the people in it, the people that she knew. There was Sir Batty that had been her hero. Now she saw him as a poor mean thing that was patiently waiting for an old man's widow, and was ready in treachery to kill a better man than himself. A better man than himself. The words as she framed them sent her thoughts newly afield. The figure of Hercules appeared to her fancy well nigh as insistently as if he were indeed in the room. She recalled his noble bearing in that grim parody of a trial, she saw him again, standing one against a multitude on the summit of the Dragon's Head; she remembered his courtesy and patience as her gaoler; she thought again of the sweetness and simplicity of his early wooing. Slowly in the crucible of her mind, the lead of her hatred was transmuted into the gold of nobler thoughts. She rose from her reflections with a new purpose in her heart.

CHAPTER XLII

THE SECRET WAY

HERCULES sat for a little while after the departure of Philemon with his head in his hands, brooding over the events of the day. He did not find himself dejected or despondent or despairing. He had played a great game for a great stake, and he had lost it, and it seemed to him only right and natural that he should pay up. It was his habit to take established facts for granted, whether he welcomed them or regretted them, and he was never the man to rejoice ignobly over success or to lament ignobly over failure. So he sat and thought, disconnectedly enough, of the happenings in his life, until his meditations were interrupted by the opening of the door, and the entry of Clarendra made him spring to his feet.

"I have to speak with you," Clarendra cried breathlessly. "You dealt generously with me in putting so little blame upon my caprice and my deceit. I should have spoken of them but I could not with all those present. But be assured I will tell my lord the truth, and my lord will understand and you shall be saved."

"Dear lady," said Hercules, "I beg that you will not vex your spirit about me. I could make my escape at this moment if I chose to do so."

Clarendra stared at him in amazement, and then her gaze travelled slowly round the great room that had been her fair and hateful prison.

"You could escape?" she asked. "You could escape from this room?"

Hercules nodded.

"I could escape," he assured her, "and you could have made to escape if you had but known what I know. There is a secret way from this room that leads, by a narrow

stairway in the thickness of the wall, to a concealed doorway at the back of the castle."

An inapt pang of vexation pricked Clarendra as she heard what Hercules said. It exasperated her to think that in all the long hours in which she had chafed and raged at her captivity, the way to freedom was only barred by her ignorance of the secret way. But Hercules' next words banished her chagrin.

"If you had discovered the secret way," he assured her, "it would have served you in no wise. For the doorway at the back of the castle is locked, and I carry the key about my person."

Clarendra had forgotten her small chagrin in her joy at the thought of the open way for him.

"If there be such a way," she entreated, "use it in Heaven's name and save yourself before it be too late."

Hercules smiled as if Clarendra had made the best joke in the world.

"I do not make my escape," he said, with a flip of his thumbs and forefingers, "because I have not made up my mind that I wish to make my escape."

"You are in the face of present death," she protested, "and you say that you do not want to make your escape."

"I have been in the face of present death many times," Hercules responded composedly. "I was going to say a hundred times, but the numeration seemed at once too large and too small. Every day, every hour, a man is elbowed by death, but that is the matter of course and does not count. But I have been in urgent peril of my life a good round dozen of times at least in the course of my travels, so I am not unused to the encounter."

"If you have slipped his fingers so often, you can slip them once again," Clarendra urged. Hercules shrugged his shoulders.

"I had my reasons then for living if the chance were given me. I am not sure that I have such reason to-day."

Clarendra looked at him steadily.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean," Hercules answered calmly, "that, as I take it, life without you would seem but a mean and meagre business. When I made so free with your dignity as to carry

you here against your will, I told myself that I was making my major stake in the game of life. If I could bring you to take me and make the best of me, why then, I had won the world. But, since it seems that I have failed in my purpose, I have no great mind to slink from the table and pretend that I cared little whether I won or lost. I wanted to win with all my heart and soul. What, after all, would life be worth to me now that I have lost? A little more eating and drinking; a little more waking and sleeping. I find it hard to assure myself that I should cherish such dregs of days."

Clarenda nursed her chin in the cup of her palm thoughtfully.

"Do you mean that you will not save your life?"

Hercules smiled cheerfully.

"I have not wound up my mind," he said quietly; "but I am not for making too much of my life. I might have lost it time and again before ere this. I mind me that I thought I had lost it when I climbed the side of the *Glory of Castile*, and a damned hidalgo cut at me with his hanger. But it was I who killed the hidalgo and boarded the *Glory of Castile*, and all that is a long time ago."

"Please, make your escape," Clarenda murmured. Again Hercules refused.

"Why do you urge me?" Hercules asked gravely. "Believe me, I should not have cared to continue my foolish living if the Armada had won the day. Breath is only precious if we breathe in a sweet air. And so, to-day, having staked my hope and my soul on the winning of you and having lost you, I begin to doubt whether I should ever again be on sufficiently good terms with existence to consent to keep it company."

Clarenda, who had been watching him while he spoke with a curious wistfulness, questioned him.

"Why do you esteem me at so great a price. I am only a woman, and you have seen many women?"

"You are my woman," Hercules answered simply. "To every man, be he profligate or puritan, there is one woman who means womanhood. Since I cannot have you I want nothing less, but I take it kindly that you found a friendly thought for me."

"I have found many friendly thoughts for you," Clarendo said slowly, "and that is why I would have you make good your escape. The life of a man like you is too good to be wasted for a woman like me."

Hercules took a few paces up and down the room, and then came to a halt in front of Clarendo.

"Do not bely yourself," he protested. "You are well worth me if I am well worth you. Tell me, if I choose to get away, can you lend me the least little shred of hope to help me about my business?"

Clarendo looked at him very steadfastly.

"You have always proclaimed yourself my lover," she answered. "If you still proclaim yourself my lover you will obey me now, without asking anything of me."

Hercules drew a long breath.

"Very well," he said, after a moment's silence. "I will do as you wish. I hope you may hear honest news of me. Good-bye."

Clarendo placed her hands against her face for a moment, covering it from his view. Then she parted her palms and looked at him with a strange kindness in her eyes.

"If you can make your escape from this place," she said, "I will go with you and stay with you to the end."

There was a sudden flame in the man's eyes as he sprang forward and seizing her hands in his hands, stared into her pale face.

"You mean it!" he cried, with a joyousness that had no taint of triumph in it, held nothing but pure wonder. "God forgive me, but I believe you mean it."

He was staring steadfastly into her face as if uncertainty sought assurance there. She assured him with a gaze as steady as his own.

"I mean it," she answered. "You have won me, if you think me worth the winning that have treated you so foully."

Hercules caught her in his arms and clasped her close. His face was very nigh to her face, but their lips were still apart.

"My dear," he murmured with an unfamiliar softness in his voice, "I am the first man in the world this hour.

And if, God willing, we live and do well, I will do my heart's endeavour to make you the first woman in the world. When a man and a woman love one another they make a great kingdom in a little room. I love you."

Clarenda surrendering her body to the grip of his great arms, cried back at him in a flame of enchanted passion, "I love you." Then their mouths met for the first time, and while they kissed, all the clocks in all the world stood still, and neither man nor maid could tell if it were years or instants that wheeled about their rapture.

But when their lips sundered and with heads drawn back they gazed each into the other's face with new joy and knowledge, Hercules spoke again.

"Wonder and glory," he said, "I am in such a happiness at this minute that I would be well-nigh content to die if I were not so crazy to live for the sake of happiness yet to be. We will get away from this place. We will cross the seas. We will find great love and a great life beyond the horizon."

Clarenda heard him but dimly, could but guess imperfectly at his meaning, but she accepted his words with the glad tranquillity of a child. Whatever Hercules said Hercules could do; she was very sure of that to the core of her heart. He had indeed won her, and she rejoiced to be won.

"Let us go," she said, and said no more, but the sound in her voice and the look in her eyes made Hercules feel as if he were the demi-god whose name he carried.

"Come," he said. "This is the way. Philemon waits with a horse."

He caught her by the wrist and drew her, readily surrendering, to that corner of the room where the picture of the Queen glared imperially upon any spectator. Hercules touched an obscure knob in the extravagant ornamentation of the frame and pressed upon it heavily. After a moment the great picture began to move a little from its place in the wall, and it seemed as if the figure of Elizabeth were slowly advancing into the chamber to join the company. Second by second and inch by inch the picture moved forward, as a door might open that was propelled by an unseen hand. For a moment Hercules and Clarenda,

standing side by side, were faced by a void of darkness in the wall of the room. The next moment that void of darkness was filled by a human presence, and my lord of Godalming entered the room through the aperture of the secret passage.

CHAPTER XLIII

SENTENCE

MY lord addressed the startled pair with a cold composure.

"I regret," he said, "to take you thus unawares and to thwart your departure. But as an old son of Devon I know something of its strongholds and I have long been aware that Mountdragon has its secret passage. It was therefore no great surprise to me to find but now Master Philemon Minster—whose conduct in the matter I do not in the least condemn—waiting with a brace of horses hard by the hidden postern. Master Philemon still waits there, but he waits in the company of my followers, and so, I fear me, that your way of departure is barred. I find that I did well to act swiftly, for I have scarce been but a pair of minutes on the other side of that picture, yet that pair of minutes were long enough to make me believe that a maid has changed her mind."

My lord spoke these words as he stood in the vacant space in the wall that was caused by the removal of the picture. Now my lord Godalming quitted the opening and moved towards the man and woman.

As my lord of Godalming advanced slowly into the room, so with equal slowness, Hercules and Clarenda, hand in hand, gave ground before him. My lord said no word but advanced upon the retreating pair with all the gravity of a Rhadamanthus until he had reached the middle of the chamber. Then he came to a halt and turned a grave face upon the girl.

"May I ask," he said, "where Mistress Constant is going in the company of her enemy?"

"My lord——" Hercules began, but the old man faced him with so stern a frown that Hercules said no more.

"I will speak to you by and by," my lord said. "Pray do

not interrupt me till I give you your turn." Again he addressed Clarendo.

"May I ask where Mistress Constant is going in the company of her enemy?"

Clarendo, startled and sick at heart, forced herself to speak though her voice sounded to her very far-away and weak.

"This man is not my enemy. This man is my friend. This man is my lover. I want to go away with him, anywhere, it matters not where, so it be in his company."

"Here is a mighty change," cried my lord in a voice of great surprise. "I understood that this man had wronged you beyond all forgiveness, that nothing but his shameful death would compensate you for your injury. Was not this indeed so, or did I dream it all?"

Clarendo, to her amazement, heard, or believed she heard, a little quaver of mirth agitate the gravity of my lord's tone; saw, or believed she saw, what, if she were thinking of any less august mortal, she would have called a twinkle in my lord's eyes. The voice had ceased to speak, but as she looked again the merriment of the twinkle still persisted. There could not be the slightest doubt of it. My lord was not angry; my lord was amused. My lord was not ferocious; my lord was good-humoured. Wonder at this carriage shook her heart so that she could scarcely breathe but stood there panting. Hercules, bewildered by this sudden shift of fortune, again essayed to speak.

"Hear me, my lord," he entreated, but my lord lifted his hand with such a dignity of one accustomed to command and to be obeyed that even the self-reliance of Hercules gave way before it.

"I will speak to you in your turn," said my lord quietly, "but for the nonce I have to talk with this maiden."

Clarendo, still to her astonishment reading into my lord's speech a friendliness foreign to its drift, found a voice to plead.

"My dear lord," she entreated, "as you have ever been goodness itself to me, be good again to-day. I love this man and I seek to save his life. Forgive me for my broken faith, pity me for my unhappy case. None may command

love, and my love for this man is greater by the width of the world than my duty to you. Only let him go free and you may do with me what you please——”

She was suddenly silent, for Hercules had placed his hand, very gently and tenderly, upon her mouth. He addressed my lord with an air of courageous respect.

“My lord, here we be, two men. It is for us to change thoughts together. This lady has done you no wrong. Rather, to my mind, you have done her a wrong. Let us go our own road and be happy in our own way.”

To Hercules’ surprise my lord gave him no direct answer, but, drawing a brace of chairs forward, motioned to the man and woman to seat themselves while he himself solemnly occupied a third. When this was finished my lord addressed the couple in a voice of perfect amiability.

“Maid and man,” he asked, and smiled in the asking, “will you give me leave to tell you a story?”

Clarenda and Hercules gaped at him, astounded by the change in his bearing.

My lord crossed one leg, still shapely in its close gear, over the other, rested his clasped hands lightly on his knee and looked at his companions with a curious expression in which humour, melancholy and tenderness were commingled.

“Maid and man,” he began, “you must needs find patience for an old man’s tale, whose purpose is to make plain much that must seem strange to you. Though you are now the chief figure in our comedy, Master Flood, yet so far as my actions and intentions were concerned you came on the stage belated. It is true that I knew much of you by report, which always proclaimed you a daring and able seaman. It is true also that I expected some person unknown to make an entry on the scene. That the unknown should bear your name is a chance that may well please us all.”

Hercules listening to the enigmatic exordium and somewhat at a loss what to say, bowed his head gravely in acknowledgment of my lord’s compliment. My lord resumed, but this time he addressed himself more directly to Clarenda.

“I dare wager,” he said, “that you have sometimes asked yourself why an old body like me, who was reputed to have

much honour and some little wisdom, should have made you an offer of marriage."

Clarenda's cheeks coloured a little under the old lord's steady eyes, but like Hercules, she kept her peace that my lord might say his say uncommented.

"Admiration for your beauty would be the sufficient justification for a younger man," my lord continued, "and I may say in all honesty that I admired your beauty very highly, in spite of my winters, with such untroubled homage as a beholder may pay to a beautiful image, a beautiful picture or a beautiful flower. In my life at Court I have seen few maids as fair as you; only once did I see one who to my eyes showed more fair, and her you closely resembled."

Clarenda guessed the meaning of his words. She had heard, as all who came to Court had heard, of my lord's love-story and of my lord's unchanging fidelity to a dear memory. My lord now slipped his hand into the bosom of his doublet and drew from thence a miniature in a golden case suspended to a golden chain. He liberated the locket from the chain, opened it and handed it to Clarenda. It contained a portrait, admirably executed, of a young woman of great beauty who did indeed resemble Clarenda conspicuously in features, hair and colouring.

"Because of that resemblance," said my lord, "I made bold to note you with a more particular observance than I should naturally have paid to any of the pretty faces that year by year float in and out of the Queen's favour. Because of that resemblance I made myself acquainted with your story, made myself acquainted, so far as a man might who had some little knowledge of the world and its creatures, with your character, became aware of your hopes and ambitions, became aware of your merits and your failings, became aware of your danger."

At the sound of this last word Clarenda's colour deepened, and her breath came quickly, for she divined what my lord would be at. Hercules, listening, kept an unchanged countenance.

"There was a man at Court," my lord continued, "who believed himself to be a miracle of cunning and craft, but whose nature I could read as easily as if it were a BA-BE Book. A pattern of selfishness, Italianate in all the vices

that our travelled youths delight to import from abroad, he was one to hunt any fair woman without mercy, without pity and without remorse. I saw well who he was then a-hunting and because of this resemblance"—my lord took back the miniature from Clarendra's trembling fingers and looked at it reverently—"I resolved to spoil his sport."

In spite of herself Clarendra lowered her eyes as my lord spoke. She knew life better now than she had known it a few short months ago and she knew more of the man my lord had painted. My lord took no notice of her emotion.

"I was resolved that you, headlong in your girlish vanity and threading with unwary gaiety the perils of a Court, should not be the immediate sacrifice to this woman-eater. I believed that your flighty carriage belied a better nature. I resolved to remove you from the Court, to place you in a careful safety till you had some leisure to know your own mind. Tell me, dear child, do you think that I did wrong in bringing my old winter into your budding spring?"

Clarendra shook her head.

"Your lordship was very thoughtful for my welfare," she answered. There was ambiguity in her voice because there was ambiguity in her mind. She was clearly conscious of a great gratitude to my lord for the pains he had been at to care for her, for the profusion of his generosity; but, also, she was dimly conscious of a small resentment at the pedagogy of the procedure, at the thought that after all she had been no more than a puppet whose strings were worked by exalted fingers.

It may well be that my lord in his wisdom and experience divined enough of her mind to discern its muted discontent. He turned his face to Hercules and its steadiness was tempered by the wistfulness of appeal.

"You, sir," he challenged, "you who have known men and cities like Ulysses of old, do you hold that I did well or ill in this business?"

"Well, by God," Hercules answered, with an emphatic slap of hand on thigh. "It were a strange thing if you who aided an old woman so wisely through all these years, could not help a young woman in her first months of adventure."

"I am glad of your approval," said my lord, with a faint

smile, "though I confess that I find myself at a loss to understand your reference to an old woman, seeing that the lady I have served all my life has been graced by Heaven with the gift of eternal youth."

He turned his regard upon Clarendia again and his voice was even gentler and friendlier than before.

"It is not more than right that you should know now, dear child, that I had at no time any thought of claiming the fulfilment of your promise to me. If I had the temerity to test your temper, I also made bold, for a time, to defend you. It was my intention at the fitting time to restore your freedom, and to solicit from your family the privilege of enriching you with such a dower as would leave you liberty and leisure to choose a fitting mate. I had indeed believed that I should stand by to aid you in your choice, but it seems that you have chosen without my help, and as Heaven is my witness I protest that you have chosen well."

"I am quite of your lordship's mind," said Clarendia and extended a hand to Hercules, who caught it and covered it in his own. "And I am grateful, with all that is good in my heart, for all the good that has come to me through you, both the good which you intended, and the good of which you had no thought. And I pray God to reward you for your exceeding commiseration and generosity."

My lord, inclining, took the girl's free hand and lifted it to his lips.

"God has rewarded me," he asserted, "in permitting me to pay some part of the debt I owed to one whose happiness I hoped to make the ceaseless care of my life. That hope passed like a dream, with my youth, but I think that the hope of my old age may find a fairer fulfilment."

For a few moments my lord kept silence, looking at the pair who sat before him with clasped hands, as if he were fain to pronounce some benediction upon them and yet, for all his statecraft, could not command the perfect phrase. Then he found it in the eternal simplicity of three words that cannot be bettered.

"God bless you," he said, and Hercules and Clarendia bowed their heads to the best and briefest of all imprecations. When the pair raised their heads again Hercules found that my lord was considering him with a changed

countenance in which playfulness struggled with sternness for supremacy.

"Here we have been changing pleasant speech," he said, "but all our speech cannot have the same pleasant savour. Man and maid, you must accompany me with speed to Exeter where I know that her Majesty will have a word or two to say to the pair of you."

CHAPTER XLIV

SOVEREIGN AND SUBJECT

JOCK HOLIDAY opened the door of a room in the Bishop's Palace at Exeter and gave Master Flood a pat with his hand. It was intended for an encouraging pat on the shoulder, but because Holiday was a little man and Master Flood a big man it alighted somewhere about the small of Hercules' back. Then Holiday pulled the door wide open and announced:

"Master Hercules Flood."

Hercules passed through the opening and the door closed between him and Holiday. The discreetly curtained room was occupied by one woman and that woman was the Queen. If Hercules had not known to whose presence he was being conducted he should have recognised her at once, in spite of her lack of likeness to Philemon's picture. It was a good many years since he last saw her—at which epoch he had indeed found her no beauty—and the fingers of Time, aided by her own fingers, had not improved her Majesty in the interval. The added years meant added weight of paint, added wealth of wig, added waggishness of carriage, added grisliness of false girlhood, added tragedy of assertive hilarity. But she was very much Elizabeth the Queen, and for all her changes, she impressed Hercules more than on the former meeting, because he had seen more of the world and of womankind since, and was wiser.

The moment he entered the room the Queen broke into a shrill little cackling laugh.

"By God!" she cried, "it is more than a month of Sundays since we last encountered, Master Flood, but I remember you as well as if it were yesterday. Do you remember me?"

Hercules bowed gravely, spoke gravely.

"No one who has seen your Majesty once could ever

forget you, however long the period between his fortunes."

He spoke with veracity, though he was far from meaning what a courtier would have wished the Queen to understand. But the Queen took the speech as a courtier's speech and allowed herself to be pleased.

"I fear you are a man of naught, Master Flood," she protested, with a ghastly smile, "and I have a very large and tough crow to pluck with you. Nevertheless, before we come to the eating, you have permission to kiss my hand."

Hercules shortened the distance between him and his sovereign in a single stride, dropped on one knee and respectfully took command of the Queen's proffered fingers. Though her hands still held their beauty of shape, the fingers were as yellow as the toes of a turkey and the brilliance of the rings they carried did but emphasize their hue, but Hercules made no bones of paying them a right hearty salutation which commended him to the Queen.

"I fear you are a saucy fellow, Captain Flood," she said with a pleased light in her untired eyes. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"In what regard, may it please your Majesty?" Hercules questioned, as he rose to his feet and stood in an attitude of respectful attention before the Queen. Elizabeth laughed at him.

"In what regard?" she drolled. "Listen to the rogue. Of course I have sent for you on no better business than to know the price of peacocks in the Indies or some such trifle. Come, you naughty rascal, what have you to say for yourself in this business of carrying off my woman?"

There was menace in the Queen's voice, as behoved, but her smiling eyes belied the threat. Hercules answered simply.

"I wanted her for my wife."

The Queen gave a queer croak of laughter.

"No more than so. You see a maid that takes your fancy and you think there is nothing other to do than to pick her up and put her in your pocket. God-a-mercy, Master Flood, what would come to the country if all its sons were like you?"

"England is well peopled," Hercules answered compos-

edly, "but she is never the worse off for men that know their own mind."

The Queen grinned again. Hercules found something tigerish in her, and she found him leonine.

"And for women that know their own mind," he continued. "I have ever striven to steer my course by the star of your Majesty's example."

"Now by my soul," cried the Queen with a great show of anger—but she was not angry—"this is beyond all patience. What have I ever done to justify salt-water jacks in kidnapping of poor maids?"

"What I meant, Madam Queen," replied Hercules, respectfully insistent, "was this, that when after due deliberation you had made up your royal mind to a certain course of action, you followed that course out to the end without overdue regard for such trifles as would stay smaller spirits."

"Well argued, master pirate," retorted Elizabeth, "but there is this flaw in your argument. I always succeed in my enterprises."

"And have I not succeeded?" Hercules questioned simply. "I set out to win the hand of this maid and I have won it."

"You came mighty nigh to losing it," the Queen said, "from all that I hear."

"Every man that risks an adventure," said Hercules, "has the chance of losing it. Whatever the odds in his favour, whatever his advantages, it is always a toss-up. The only thing that is worth a whistle is the finish. Well, if your Majesty will permit me the liberty, I whistle."

And therewithal Master Hercules Flood made so bold as to whistle a few bars of that mad Armada song which all London and all England was singing, whistling, shrieking, screeching, shouting, in those brave days when her Majesty and her Majesty's very humble subjects were a certain number of years the younger. The hot brown eyes were, for a moment, glassed with tears.

"By the Mass," cried Elizabeth—it pleased her sometimes to be very Catholic in her ejaculations—"you speak well, but you whistle better than you speak. A little more and I should have asked you to hand me down the hall in a

mad-cap dance. There is much to be said for you, Master Flood."

The brown eyes ogled; the painted face leered; the bewigged head vacillated in an exaggeration of coquetry. Hercules understanding that there was a call upon his gallantry, declined to understand.

"Nobody can say more for me," he answered soberly, "than I can say for myself. For whatever else I may be ignorant of, I do know myself, and what I purpose to achieve and what I am powerful to achieve. In the spring of my days I set out to make a fortune and I made it. In the prime of my life I set out to win a wife and I won her. It is quite an honourable record."

Elizabeth laughed to the man's gallant carriage, at the shrewdness of his simplicity.

"Vastly well," she protested, "vastly well. You carry yourself as if all you had to do in the world was to pick a maid-peach from the wall and swallow her, just because you had a mind to the fruit. Let me tell you, master buccaneer, that such blustering business sees no favour in England and that if I had a mind for it, I could have your head."

"Your Majesty already has my heart," Hercules protested, "so the leave of me is of little consequence."

He began to believe, as he spoke, that he had in him the possibilities of a courtier and he smiled at the supposition. The Queen grinned.

"By God," she averred, "for every word I say you have a word to answer me. So I think I will not chop logic with you any longer but just in all brevity deliver my sentence."

She tightened her lips and for a moment the chords of the heart of Hercules tightened, for he felt that this was indeed a royal cat and he, for all his inches, no more than a mouse. Who, in all England, could tell what she meant behind her frown, behind her smile. But this time it seemed that her smile carried its face value.

"If I ask for your sword," she said, "it is not to deal you the death, but to give you the accolade which you have deserved from the past and shall yet merit in the future."

She pointed, as she spoke, with so unmistakable a gesture

at the sword which hung by Hercules' side that he had no choice but to pluck it forth and hand it by the blade to the Queen.

"We have no witnesses," said Elizabeth, as she grasped the blade by its hilt, "but I shall remember and your patent shall be duly made out to you. Kneel, Master Flood." Hercules knelt and the sword tapped his shoulder. "Arise, Sir Hercules Flood." Hercules rose. "And now, Sir Hercules, go to your maid and wed her and taste your moon of honey, but, by my father's beard, it shall be no more than a month, for you have offended, and you have to purge your offence, and I have work for you with the Spaniards which, if you accomplish it, shall win your forgiveness."

The Queen again tendered him the jewelled fingers, in signal of dismissal. Hercules dropped on one knee and saluted them.

"God save your Majesty," he said, as he rose, "and God save me to serve you as you should be served."

He took his leave and as he passed through the ante-chamber he gratified Jock Holiday with the gift of a comfortable purse.

When he had gone the Queen looked into a mirror and saw there her image, not indeed as it seemed, but as she wished it to seem.

"If things had been otherwise," she murmured, "there goes a man who would have made a proper mate for me."

But things were not otherwise, and Hercules was hastening to his Clarendra.

THE END

